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# THOUGHTS ON SPIRITUAL LIFE

Swami Bhuteshananda

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Swami Bhuteshananda



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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

During the long tenure of his spiritual ministry, formerly as the Vice-President and presently as the President of the Ramakrishna Order, Revered Swami Bhuteshananda has delivered discourses at various places both in India and abroad in response to the earnest request of spiritual seekers. Delivered extempore, these discourses cover a wide range of topics on spiritual life, all centring on one theme—spiritualization of human life. Many of these discourses were published in various periodicals at different times. In the present book *Thoughts on Spiritual Life* we are happy to place before our readers some of the published and unpublished discourses together with an introduction which the revered Swami has kindly added to them.

Revered Swami Bhuteshananda lived a life of spiritual contemplation and dedicated service for a long time at the feet of some of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Besides, he is endowed with a deep understanding of scriptures and different aspects of spiritual life. No wonder, therefore, that his discourses have proved immensely helpful in grasping the true spirit of the scriptures and getting answers to many questions related to the spiritual life of modern man.

Of the articles published in the book the article on 'The Significance of Spiritual Initiation' is a reprint of the article originally published under the title, 'Importance of Mantra Dīkṣā' in the May 1985 issue of the *Prabuddha Bharata*. 'Jñāna and Karma are Complementary', published in the same journal in November 1981, has been rearranged and given a new title 'Realization through the Paths of Knowledge and Action'. The last article 'Sri Ramakrishna and Self-Surrender' is a translation of the article 'Śaraṇāgati' (in Bengali) published by the Udbodhan Office in a booklet by the same name. We are grateful to the Udbodhan Office for allowing us to include an English translation of the article in this book.

The revered Swami has kindly looked through the material of the present book and after making minor additions and alterations has kindly approved its publication.

Several books of the revered Swami have come out in Bengali. But there was a long-felt need for a book of this kind in English. We hope this publication will fulfil that need.

Advaita Ashrama  
Mayavati  
15 August 1991

PUBLISHER

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## INTRODUCTION

In modern times the world has made great advance so far as the acquisition of the various amenities of life is concerned. But, along with the objects of enjoyment have also come in various troubles with which we are being afflicted in our everyday life. Consequently, even after having so many ways to pleasure, there is the feeling of insecurity and unhappiness.

Whether in the East or in the West, the condition of human life today is more or less the same though there may be qualitative and quantitative differences in the nature of the joys and sorrows. We talk of backward and advanced countries, rich and poor countries and so forth. But there is one malady present everywhere and that is all-pervading unhappiness. In affluent countries they have enough wealth and sufficient amenities of life; but they are not happy. In India, on the other hand, many people are below the poverty line. They lack even the minimum requirements of life — they do not have enough to eat and enough to wear. Many lack enough accommodation. The problems that affect Indians today are mostly inadequate food, clothing, shelter, literacy and finance. Those who are comparatively affluent here are found to be without any belief in their ancient moral values and philosophical roots which can

## INTRODUCTION

make their lives stable and firm. The problems that affect such people are lack of moral, cultural and spiritual values.

What is the root cause of all our problems? All our problems are caused by our not being able to find a direction towards which we should move. People all over the world, especially the younger generation, are bewildered because they do not know what should be the goal of their life. In the absence of such a definite goal, many young people are taking to devious ways, like becoming hippies, and turn out to be anti-social. Neither can they accommodate themselves in the society nor can the society find ways to make them live well-integrated lives. Each individual is a unit of life and society is composed of such units. So, the evils that are present in the units affect the society as a whole. Therefore, unhappiness and misery have today become universal.

What then should be the aim that we should strive for? One thing has to be understood: Our search for happiness outside is in vain. Happiness, peace, joy and perfection are all inherent in us. Every man has the divine element in him, the Self or Atman. As Swami Vivekananda says, 'There is something in us which is free and permanent. But it is not the body, neither is it the mind. Beyond this momentary sheathing of gross matter, beyond even the finer covering of the mind is the Atman, the true Self of man, the permanent, the ever Free.' Blessedness, eternal peace, happiness and joy can be had only in perfect freedom. As long as man is bound by his senses, he cannot attain true happiness.

Man is bound by his ignorance. So, the goal of man should be freedom from ignorance. 'Each soul is potentially divine and the goal is to manifest the divinity within.' With the manifestation of inner divinity comes true peace, real happiness and freedom from misery. That is the goal that we all should strive for. In the following pages, we shall discuss these ideas.



## NEED FOR A SUPREME GOAL IN LIFE

It is a big grazing land. A cow is grazing and feeding itself on very good grass. For the moment, the cow seems to be happy and contented. But soon afterwards, it likes to have the grass that is near the other cow. And that grass is not as good as the one it was eating. Consequently, it loses good grass for nothing! That is how efforts are frustrated.

Our energies are being scattered in all directions. We live without any purpose; that is just like living the life of an animal. An animal's life is lived in the senses and every moment its aim changes. Our efforts are being frustrated owing to our negligence in cultivating a sort of integrated personality in which we have one abiding aim in life for the attainment of which our whole energy will have to be directed.

'Personality' means our individuality and its outlook on life. It is the result of how we look at the world, how we try to be a part and parcel of the world and how we behave in the world. An integrated personality will mean a personality that will have at every stage of life one supreme ideal, and all other subsidiary ideals as only subordinate to the one supreme goal.

## The Need for Integration of Personality

Not all personalities are always integrated. This is because, the personality that we develop is not a methodically constructed one. As we think, so we behave; as is our objective, so do we live our lives! If we reflect over our past, we find that in childhood, we did not have any definite objective or aim in life. At one moment we sought something; at another moment, another. A child's mind always wavers like that. It is fickle. It has not developed any sort of personality as a whole. As children, what were we seeking? Perhaps, some sweet things to eat and some good words from the elders. That was all. There were no other objectives. But as we grow, our choices become different, our desires become different and our efforts to arrive at the fulfilment of these desires too become very different. We are not merely satisfied with the desires of a child wanting things to eat and toys to play with. We require more lasting things to be with us. We require status in society, we require appreciation from our superiors, we want respect from our subordinates and we want to be above the other members of the group. That is the idea that gradually grows in our mind, even as we grow physically. But even with all these, our personality has not been integrated and our hopes are being frustrated. This is because, we are not trying to concentrate our energies towards the attainment of one supreme objective. If we do not live for the attainment of some high objective or some high goal in life, our lives become worthless. Our time is spent in different pursuits without any understanding of their relative significance.

A man who has lived a so-called successful life in his early days feels towards the end of his life that his time was wasted. The reason is, what he thought to be the objective then, what he thought to be the aim of his life then, is now merely child's play. That means, we are frittering away the precious time at our disposal. Time runs in an unalterably unilateral direction. It passes away, never to come back. The days of our life as children can be counted on the tips of our fingers. Then comes the period of adulthood, when we are sufficiently grown up and are conscious of responsibilities. If we do not accept those responsibilities and do not try to fulfil them, we shall be counted worthless, and misfits in society. We must therefore make it clear to ourselves as to what we want most to attain in life. That conviction should be there and it should be properly deliberated upon and fixed on a rational basis.

People who live only for one objective in life are generally termed 'monomaniacs'. A monomaniac has got one ideal supremely commanding him and he will not be able to behave with others the way normal people do. In such cases, there is no door open for him through which to communicate with others. That is of course not the meaning of an integrated personality. The monomaniac is *commanded* by his ideal, whereas an integrated personality is a sound individual who gradually develops his ideal in life through his own intense efforts. In an integrated personality, ideas become more and more clear and stable as he grows and he thinks of one supreme end of life as the goal and all other things are secondary to him.

## Developing an Integrated Personality

Now, how to develop that integrated personality? That obviously is the quest. First of all, we shall have to consider life carefully. We shall have to consider the different ideals with their relative importance and then ultimately make a decision of interests. That is, some things are needed only with passing interest, some other things are more important and we should devote more energy towards their attainment; and with all these, there should be one supreme quest in life. We may not be clear in the beginning as to what that supreme goal in life is. We may not even have a clear conception of the highest goal of life. Gradually we shall have to get a clear understanding as to what should be the supreme goal and how other things are to be kept in subordination to that goal. That is a very important decision which has to be made by any person. It is not always that we make correct decisions from the very beginning. Our ideas may change, our ultimate objective in life may not be clear right now, as was said earlier. But we should have some idea about how to proceed towards the goal. The highest goal, which should be rational and a real protective factor, has to be sought after step by step in our lives. Life without an ideal is like a boat without a helm, a helm to direct the course of the boat. Otherwise, it will drift with the current and will never reach a point. If we are to reach a goal, it will never come of itself to us. We shall have to direct ourselves towards that. So also, personality has to be properly cultivated so that every moment of our existence may be lived usefully and purposefully, with the decision that we should not

waste our time, but direct all our energies towards the attainment of the goal of life. A man who can concentrate his energies from the very beginning towards the highest goal, and who has consequently got an integrated personality, is verily a lucky man. But then, we do not have such luck always!

### The Fourfold Ideal of Life

In ancient India, the four ideals of life were clearly classified and mentioned. They are—*dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*—religion, objects of enjoyment, desire and liberation from all desires. These four are not all of the same amount of importance—one is not as important as the other. According to the outlook of ancient days, *dharma* is the means for the attainment of good, here and hereafter.<sup>1</sup> The path that leads to supreme realization in the end is the path of *dharma*. *Dharma* also means our duties towards others—towards the people with whom we live. So far as individuals are concerned, we are in a society and we live with others. There must be some sort of relationship between ourselves and our environment—a bond with the people with whom we live. We cannot live in this world in isolation. Our lives are always connected with the lives of those who are around us and therefore, we must have a particular form of relationship towards them. What should be our attitude towards others?

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<sup>1</sup> यतोऽभ्युदयनिःश्रेयससिद्धिः स धर्मः ।  
*Kuṇāda*

Those that are weak should be protected, those who are elders should be respected, and service must be rendered unto those who need our service. The more we can give unto others without reserve, the more integrated a personality we shall be. The more we are free from selfish ideas, the more integrated shall we be. Selfishness alone is the disintegrating factor.

*Artha* and *kāma* are the two goals for a man after the objects of enjoyment. A man who is greedy and one full of selfish desires (*kāma*) want a world of their own, which will provide them with sufficient pleasures. The final goal is *mokṣa* which means liberation from all desires, all ignorance, all limitations.

These different objectives sometimes bewilder us and they even become conflicting with one another. A person who has no such conflict, who has carefully chosen one highest aim or ambition in life and to whom all other pursuits are only secondary, will be persistent in attaining the highest goal. That is certainly a better utilization of one's personality.

### The Way to the Highest

Our ancient *r̄sis* divided our life into four stages or periods.<sup>2</sup> Firstly, the period of *brahmacarya* or the practice of restraint, of becoming useful and able to use our interests and energies towards the attainment of the

<sup>2</sup> ... ब्रह्मचर्यं [परि] समाप्य गृही भवेत्, गृही भूत्वा वनी भवेत्, वनी भूत्वा प्रवर्जेत् । यदि वेतरथा ब्रह्मचर्यादेव प्रवर्जेद् गृहाद्ववनाद्वा ।

*Jābālopaniṣad*

goal. This is the preparatory period. This period in earlier days was completed by about twenty-five years. The next twenty-five years were devoted to *gārhasthya* or to being a householder. The life of a householder with its attendant duties should be led in a way that will ultimately take one towards the higher pursuits of life. The third period is *vānaprastha* or a life in isolation. A time will come when one should retire from all one's activities and resort to a more secluded life where he will be interested in seeking only the higher values of life, namely, the attainment of God or liberation from ignorance. So, one will have to gradually train oneself to be dissociated from earlier lower pursuits. The householder's pursuit is quite different from that of a *vānaprasthi*; the latter has to keep himself away from the old habits and old environments and live in isolation and try to pursue the attainment of inner illumination. Last of all comes *sannyāsa*, the ultimate stage of renunciation when everything will be renounced for the sake of attaining that abiding principle which is eternal peace, eternal happiness, eternal joy and more importantly, eternal knowledge and eternal existence. We all want to be immortal. Perhaps we do not know that we cannot be immortal physically. We are trying to lengthen our life-span more and more. We are never sacrificing the limited pleasures of physical existence. So, we try to live as long a life as possible. But it is never given to us to have eternal life in the senses, in the physical body. Whatever is an assemblage of different factors must disintegrate; it will have to come to an end necessarily. There is no escape from that. A state

has to be reached which will be abiding and will never come to an end, because that is the state that we want ourselves to be in. But we can have only that kind of immortality which is not physical. It is the immortality of the undying Self within, our true personality. It is not limited to the body, it is not bound to the senses, it is not merely a stage of existence. It is Existence itself—*Sat-cit-ānanda*. We are all pursuing it either knowingly or unknowingly. Our motive really is that, though we are often unaware of the true meaning of it.

That is the objective a person should have from the early stage of his life. The sooner it is developed, the better; and the more we concentrate our energies on that, the more do we advance and nearer the goal we shall be. That is what we understand by the predominance of one ultimate goal over the temporary ones.

To attain this perfect integration in life, this state of eternal existence, knowledge and bliss, we shall have to give up our selfishness. For selfishness is the main disintegrating factor in life.

## AWAKENING OF SPIRITUAL LIFE

### The Nature of the Bound Soul

Sri Ramakrishna, a great observer of human nature, says that people are mostly running after worldly enjoyments and that their minds are only in the lower levels. He has mentioned at length the condition of men in bondage,<sup>1</sup> who are absolutely forgetful of higher life and remain busy and satisfied with the lowest kinds of enjoyment. They are born in bondage, they remain in bondage and will die in bondage. They have no awareness of anything better than that. They think that it is God who has kept them in this condition and that it is not possible for them to bring about any change. Such statements are often made: 'Oh! We are worldly people!' What do they mean by this 'worldly people'? Who made them worldly? They unfortunately blame God without listening to the teachings of god-men which can lift them from this unhappy condition. This trend of shirking responsibility is very common. Sri Ramakrishna illustrates this kind of attitude by a story: A brahmin once made a beautiful garden. One day, a

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986), pp. 87, 164-65

cow entered the garden and destroyed many plants. This made the brahmin furious. He gave the cow a blow. It was such a hard blow that the cow instantly fell dead. The sin of killing the cow came to the brahmin. The brahmin said that he was not responsible for the killing. It was the hand that gave the blow and the hand moves by the power of Indra.<sup>2</sup> So, it was Indra who killed the cow. The brahmin told the sin to go to Indra. When sin came to Indra, Indra was taken aback! Learning the entire incident, Indra went to the brahmin in the form of an old brahmin and started praising the beauty of the garden, saying: 'I have never seen such a beautiful garden before. Who has made this?' The brahmin was pleased to hear this and came forward with the remark, 'Sir, I have made the garden.' He asked Indra, who was in disguise, to come and see more beautiful things inside. At every step something new was seen and Indra asked repeatedly: 'Beautiful! Whoever has made it.' The brahmin would reply proudly that he made it. Gradually they came to the place where the dead cow lay. As if shocked, Indra exclaimed: 'Who killed the cow?' The brahmin realized his folly and kept silent.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> According to Vedanta each part of the body is controlled by a particular deity.

... एतैरेव [गुणैः] रजोगुणोपेतैः पञ्चभूतैर्यथाक्रमं वाक्‌पाणिपादपायूपस्थाभ्यानि कर्मेन्द्रियाणि जायन्ते । तेषाञ्च क्रमेण वहीन्द्र-उपेन्द्र-मृत्यु-प्रजापतयोऽधिष्ठातृदेवताः ।

Dharmarāja Adhvarendra, *Vedānta Paribhāṣā*

<sup>3</sup> *Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1990) pp. 66-67.

Similarly, we claim responsibility for everything that is good and shirk the responsibility for actions which should not have been done by us.

As Sri Ramakrishna says, fishermen make a trap to catch fish. The fish enters the trap of its own accord and then cannot escape from there. It can come out through the door by which it has entered. But it never finds that. It goes on round and round, never finding a way out. We have ourselves got this kind of bondage brought upon us. The silkworm weaves the cocoon, surrounds itself with the silk thread and does not know how to get out of it. It remains bound, a prisoner in the prison of its own make. ‘A worm that revels in dirt is happy there,’ says Sri Ramakrishna, ‘If you put it in a rice pot, it will die.’<sup>4</sup> If we are taken away from our environment and placed in a better condition, we feel miserable. We shall search for the ‘dirt’ with which we are so familiar. This is the condition of a man of the world, a man in bondage.

### The Voice Within

It is said in the *Gītā*: ‘Amongst thousands of people, there is hardly a rare soul who strives for liberation; and amongst the thousands that are striving, rarely is a man blessed with enlightenment.’<sup>5</sup> This is true for all times. One sad truth known to everybody is the obvious fact that we have no urge for spiritual life. We can see this

<sup>4</sup> *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., p. 165

<sup>5</sup> मनुष्याणां सहस्रेषु कश्चिद्यति सिद्धये ।

यततामपि सिद्धानां कश्चिन्नां वेति तत्त्वतः ॥

for ourselves if we look within us, as also around us. We usually say that it is because of being born in the *kaliyuga* that this is so. But this condition prevailed since the very ancient days, even the days of the Vedas and the Upaniṣads. If only there was that urge for spirituality in us, that would have made us restless because of the awareness that we have not reached the goal yet. So, we are doomed to lead a life which is absolutely without hunger or thirst for spiritual enlightenment! Fortunately, we are not only a few 'doomed souls'; we are in a very good number. The largest number of people will be of this type, and those who are not so are supposed to be what they call in modern times, 'abnormal'!

There are some blessed souls who do not behave as we do. Their lives charm us. This is because our worldly lives do not give us the satisfaction that we are seeking, the satisfaction that we want to derive from sense-enjoyment. Any such enjoyment becomes boring and tasteless when repeated too much. Therefore, any lasting attraction for enjoyments is impossible. Again, suppose we have all the objects of enjoyment, but a weak body; then, the enjoyments will only create more dissatisfaction in us. Sometimes we may have a strong body and mind, and every opportunity for enjoyment also. We may have then the maximum joy that is possible for a human being. But in spite of all these, suppose we remember that these joys will not last forever or that we shall have to quit leaving behind all these joys one day, does that prospect make us happy? No, it does not. But, we are asked not to look at those 'dark sides' of life. They say, 'Don't be a pessimist;

make most of whatever opportunity is presented to you'. That is what our elders advise us often. If their boy shows any kind of spiritual leanings, the parents say, 'Oh! you are very precocious. You are unnecessarily bothering yourself with such things. If you are thinking of prayer and devotion to God, well, this is not the time for such things. They may be attended to in the future. Enjoy your life now.' We receive such instructions from our elders because they have wasted their own lives. And in old age it is not possible for them to change their way of life or their way of thinking. This is how the vicious circle is going on. This is unfortunately the tradition we are expected to follow. But even when we follow this, a small voice within us occasionally whispers to our consciousness: 'My good fellow! What are you doing? You are losing your life's opportunity!'

This small voice is always insistent and that is why we try to keep ourselves preoccupied with other things so that it does not disturb us. We feel depressed when we are alone and unoccupied because we are afraid of that whisper of the inner voice. We try to remain satisfied with the little bits of joy and sorrow that we come across, and thus remain forgetful about the greater things that matter in life. Sri Ramakrishna mentions a man who was fifty years old and was playing cards, saying that he could not otherwise pass his time.<sup>6</sup> Thus, we are trying our best to turn a deaf ear to that voice within. But, the voice does not stop whispering. That is the greatest gift of God unto poor humanity.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., p. 165  
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### The Messengers of Hope

The question is often asked, 'Is there no way out?' A doubt naturally arises in our mind, 'Are we eternally doomed? Is there no way out of the state of utter damnation?' Sri Ramakrishna and other great enlightened souls come to show us by their lives as to how we can get out of this bondage. The world would have been completely dark had not such flashes of light been there, though such flashes are very rare.

Sri Ramakrishna came and made it his aim of life to awaken and enlighten 'sleeping' souls. He made it his goal of life to speak before people that they were wasting their life's opportunity. He would talk to them about God and things spiritual. He said with great emphasis that there was a way out of bondage.

Such great souls are called Messengers of God or men through whom God reveals Himself, so that men can have easier access to Him. Through the example of such men, people may have a little reawakening and some among them may change their ways. Jesus said, 'I am the Way',<sup>7</sup> meaning thereby that he was the way through which people could reach God. Sri Ramakrishna says that everything that is said and done by god-men is for the sake of others. They want to awaken sleeping souls to struggle and realize their innate divinity. These great men come, show us light and give us illustration as to how we can redeem ourselves. They do this not only while living in the body, but also after the dissolution of the body and remain in this

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<sup>7</sup> Bible, St. John 14:6. Digitized by eGangotri

world as a force, making people aware of their future goal, the ultimate destination of their life, their inner divinity. They leave a band of workers behind to follow up the work they did during their physical existence, and that is how the force of good continues. The continuance of both good and evil keeps this world going.

### Our Potential Divinity

Divinity is inherent in us. We are never eternally doomed because the eternal Spirit is undying. This flame within us can never be extinguished. It is always burning there. Divinity is our birthright, however forgetful we may remain about it. It has been illustrated in the Upaniṣads thus: A miserly man had buried all his wealth underground. The inheritor of that wealth walked over that treasure, but never knew that it was there.<sup>8</sup> So also, we have got all the treasure and yet we are simply walking over it, never knowing that it is there and never trying to discover it.

I often give the illustration of a prince in a palace, well-protected and sleeping in his mother's lap and dreaming that he is wandering about in a forest and being stalked by a tiger and starts crying. The mother gives the child a shake and the dream breaks. The child sees that he is safely lodged in the mother's arms and smiles. Shaking off the dream is what is necessary and

<sup>8</sup> ... हिरण्यनिधिं निहितमक्षेत्रज्ञा उपर्युपरि सञ्चरतो न विन्देयुः ...

hence we are being given rude shocks now and then. Yet, we feel that the sleep is beautiful and peaceful. The shocks and pains have become natural to us. But the merciful Lord knows how to awaken us with rude blows. He has got the nectar and also the thunder. Thunder is to break our dreams and nectar to make us immortal. We shall receive what we are worthy for from God. We are in a bad dream and we have got to be awakened to the Truth, the glorious life that awaits us, the life in the Spirit. That is what is required for us. That is why men of God have to come in our midst and vigorously shake us, so that we can get rid of the bad dream. It is these God-men who have kept the beacon light burning for us to show the destination that we have to reach and the way to reach it. That is what is meant by spiritual life and spiritual men.

In most people, there is hardly any real awakening. Real awakening will come only when we cannot live without our communion with God. God will become our imperative need. Therefore, real spiritual men are few and far between. For most people, God is only a dispenser of good things and through God they are trying to have the things which they are unable to attain with their own limited capacity. God is not served for His own sake but for the sake of the good things that He will provide. But those who have real awakening, cannot live without God. Fish cannot live without water. We cannot live without air. In the same way, life cannot be lived without the essential spiritual content that we have. It is for us to discover it and we can indeed do so provided we follow the footprints that the great men

have left on this earth to guide us.

### The Call of Sri Ramakrishna

Sri Ramakrishna has clearly stated the guidelines for us. He says, 'I have lighted the fire; it is for you to come and enjoy its warmth. I have built the mould; it is for you to come and cast yourself in it. I have cooked the food; it is for you to come and sit at the food placed before you.'<sup>9</sup> Everything is there, ready. What is lacking is our earnestness to get the benefit of the great treasure he has left, out of his infinite mercy, for us. Sri Ramakrishna gave us detailed instructions as to how to proceed step by step towards the goal. He did not keep anything secret or mysterious which needed to be clarified. It was all made as clear as daylight. We know now what is to be done. But what is lacking is the will, the determination to proceed along the path. We should not delay any more. For, the more we wait, the more we shall suffer from the absence of Light. If the Truth is realized then only it will be there in reality for you. If it is not realized here then it is a great loss.<sup>10</sup>

As it is said in the Upanisads there are two things, *sreyas* and *preyas*.<sup>11</sup> That is, God keeps before us the enjoyable things of the world and also the Truth that

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1983) Vol. 1, p. 93

<sup>10</sup> इह चेदवेदीदथ सत्यमस्ति

न चेदिहावेदीन्महती विनष्टिः ।

*Kena Upaniṣad*, 1 : 13

<sup>11</sup> *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, 1 : 2 : 2

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liberates us from this life of sense-enjoyments and their bondage. It is for us to make the choice. With most of us the choice has been wrong. We have bartered our soul for the sake of little mundane joys and have finally come to suffering. It is again assured to us that if we so like, we can get out of this bondage and suffering. But it requires strong determination to cut asunder the bondage and attraction of mundane pleasures which overwhelm most of us by their sensuous charms. And once we have been able to bring the light of God in our heart, all darkness of slavery and suffering will disappear.

Sri Ramakrishna says that a room may be kept dark for a thousand years, but as soon as one strikes a match, the darkness disappears.<sup>12</sup> So, thousands of years of ignorance will vanish the very moment we shall strike the ‘match of Knowledge’. We shall then have the final illumination and illumination is our birthright.

Sri Ramakrishna used to call: ‘Come on! Where are you all? I am waiting for you!’<sup>13</sup> He would stand on top of the roof of the Dakshineswar’s Kuṭhi building and call out thus. That call is still ringing; that insistence still goes on. He is still calling. If we do not listen to it, we are lost. The call will continue forever and there will be a few who will listen to it and will go and place themselves at his feet. Sri Ramakrishna incarnated himself in India, the most spiritual land, in order to show the way to divine life for the whole world in the

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<sup>12</sup> *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit, p. 298

<sup>13</sup> Cf., ibid., p. 284

present age. His call is continuing and it is up to us to get benefited by that call.

Let us pray that our nightmarish dreams of ignorance may be broken, that we may be freed from this delusion and misery and be awakened to march ahead to the feet of the Lord!

## THE IDEAL OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA

### The Meaning of Avatāra

Śrī Kṛṣṇa showed Arjuna a tree where there were hanging bunches of black fruit-like things, and asked, ‘What are they?’ Arjuna said that they looked like black berries. Śrī Kṛṣṇa said, ‘Look carefully. What do you find now?’ Arjuna replied, ‘Kṛṣṇa, hundreds of Kṛṣṇas are hanging on that tree and look like black berry fruits.’ The tree is evidently the ultimate reality or Brahman and the things that look like fruits are the *avatāras*.

Sri Ramakrishna has been described by Swami Vivekananda as unique. He has been called an incarnation of God. What is meant by Sri Ramakrishna's being an incarnation? Addressing Swamiji, Sri Ramakrishna himself says: 'He who was born as Rāma and as Kṛṣṇa is now born as Ramakrishna', and adds: 'This is not in the light of your Vedanta'.<sup>1</sup> According to the highest ideas of Vedanta, everybody in reality is Brahman, appearing as human beings.

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1989) Vol.1, p.183.  
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## The Ideal of an Avatarā

The *Bhāgavata* says: God's incarnations are innumerable.<sup>2</sup> This is because, time is eternal and through eternity, God is incarnating Himself again and again to save mankind from destruction. What is the relation of the *avatāra* to humanity? Śrī Kṛṣṇa mentions: 'Whenever righteousness declines and unrighteousness prevails, I incarnate myself.'<sup>3</sup> What is that 'I' here? Is it the Kṛṣṇa who was born as the son of Vasudeva and Devaki? Evidently not. Śrī Kṛṣṇa says again: 'This eternal Yoga I taught to Vivaswān; that same ancient Yoga you have been taught by me today'; 'I am the father of this world'<sup>4</sup> etc. Who is the 'I' again? He is certainly not the Kṛṣṇa born as a friend of Arjuna. It was the Kṛṣṇa who is the same as the great principle from which the world emerges and into which the world ultimately gets merged. It is the great principle that Śrī Kṛṣṇa reveals in Himself, and it should be remembered that it is the same ultimate principle which is also called Ramakrishna. That is why we are not in a position to measure Him who is the ultimate principle which is immeasurable and of the nature of Infinity.

Swami Vivekananda says, 'It requires another Vivekananda to understand what this Vivekananda has done'.<sup>5</sup> When he himself speaks in that strain, and again when he speaks of his Guru as competent to

<sup>2</sup> *Bhāgavatam*, 1 : 3 : 26

<sup>3</sup> *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 4 : 7

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 4 : 1

<sup>5</sup> *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 652

produce lakhs of Vivekanandas from a handful of dust, what could be the assessment of Sri Ramakrishna? We do not know. We are more or less like brinjal-sellers appraising a diamond.<sup>6</sup> We can measure only according to our height in spiritual life. How insignificant are we in this respect! So, to judge Sri Ramakrishna is impossible and should never be attempted at; it would be worse than foolhardiness. But, even then, we require some idea by means of which we can set up our ideal before us and then follow him. Everybody has his own idea about his ideal and it has to be remembered that one's personal ideal is one's own and cannot work as the ideal for everyone. Ideals are different for different persons. When God incarnates, He satisfies all these different ideals; He comprises within Himself all these different ideals and much more. That is what Sri Ramakrishna is, and what we should understand him to be. As for us, it is necessary to have an estimate of him so that we can follow that ideal in our lives.

### **Teaching by Example**

In Sri Ramakrishna's life, there are many things that are supernatural. Yet there are many others which are perfectly natural by which we can understand him as we understand everybody else. Swami Saradananda, in his hagiography, or, the interpretation of the biography of Sri Ramakrishna, entitled, *Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master*, tries to hint out how we can look upon Sri Ramakrishna from our point of view. That is,

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<sup>6</sup> cf. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 759  
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he has judged Sri Ramakrishna from different angles and, particularly, from the angle of a perfect human being. The *Great Master* says that this perfection was not manifest in the Master from the very beginning.<sup>7</sup> This manifestation of perfection took place stage by stage. If he were perfect from the very beginning, we could hardly have been benefited from his advent. He came and unfolded himself step by step so that we can also similarly try to unfold our inner divinity gradually. That is why his life is an inspiration and a guidance to us. Like a beacon light, he shows how the ideal can be reached step by step by every human being. That is what an incarnation of God comes for. An incarnation's life is meant for showing mankind how this puny creature called man can ultimately manifest his infinite nature.

It is said in the Upaniṣads: 'Man is but a fraction of a hundredth part of the tip of a hair. But he has also the potential to become infinite.'<sup>8</sup> The small bit is capable of becoming infinite! Our smallness is due to our identification with the limited body. Once, we understand our true essence, we become boundless, infinite. This is the core of the teaching of Sri Ramakrishna. That is what the *avatāra* shows before us by demonstrating this truth in his own life. If this was not so, God could have manifested as he did in the prison of Vasudeva and

<sup>7</sup> See for example, Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1983] Vol. 1, p. 109

<sup>8</sup> वालाग्रशतभागस्य शतधा कल्पितस्य च ।

भागो जीवः स विज्ञेयः स चानन्त्याय कल्पते ॥

Devaki and could have said that he was born. There, He appeared before them with four arms and in all divine splendour. He said that this was to remind them that he was the same being whom they wanted as their child. The mother then entreated that he become an ordinary child, since Kṛṣṇa would come to know of him and would destroy him if he remained in this form. In order to satisfy the mother, Kṛṣṇa then became an ordinary child.<sup>9</sup> This ‘becoming an ordinary child’ is what is meant by *avatāra*, or descent of God as man. Even in the case of an *avatāra*, the child has to grow into manhood, then to old age and finally to decay and death. The body, its development and ultimately its decay and death are aspects in the life of an incarnation like every mortal. Again, the Spirit indomitable, its unfoldment and ultimate manifestation as the great Being, is another aspect of this life. When we say that Sri Ramakrishna is an incarnation, it means that he possesses in him the entire property of divinity. He is the *Īśvara* in an embodied human form. His whole life is there before us unfolding itself step by step, physically and also spiritually. He is said to develop spiritually too, because this has to be done for our sake. He did tremendous spiritual practice and then said: ‘I have done so much. That much is not necessary for you. You do only a portion of it: one-sixteenth of this is enough.’<sup>10</sup> We do not know how much even this one-sixteenth portion will be!

<sup>9</sup> See *Bhāgavatam*, 10 : 3

<sup>10</sup> See *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, op. cit. Vol. 1, p. 93  
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## The Great Experimentor

In the history of world religions, we never find any teacher doing spiritual experiments the way Sri Ramakrishna did. We find expressions of great catholicity in the scriptures of Hinduism, and perhaps of other religions as well. The ancient Vedas declare: 'Truth is one; sages call it by various names.'<sup>11</sup> Divine incarnations and prophets have made similar statements. But history has no record that any of these great teachers did actually practise the different paths and ultimately realized the same goal through each of them. As far as we know, Sri Ramakrishna alone did it, and this is what makes his life unique. The catholicity that he taught was not just an expression of a broad mind or a broad philosophical outlook but had deep experimental content. It was one of the most valuable experiences that he gained through his experiments. When he spoke of other paths, it was about his own experiences of those paths that he spoke. He respected every path and never criticized any.

## The Egoless One

With all this, Sri Ramakrishna was without a trace of egoism. He wanted always to be only an instrument in the hands of the Divine Mother, as he used to say. Sri Ramakrishna never thought of himself. He thought of himself only as an instrument of God. He used to say that within him there was nothing but the Mother. Here,

<sup>11</sup> एकं सत् विप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति ।

the Mother means the Mother of the Universe. Thus, he lived always in perfect oneness with the Divine. Sri Ramakrishna annihilated his ego and thereby could become the fittest instrument through which divine hands could work—that is precisely what is known as incarnation of God or *avatāra*.<sup>12</sup> The *avatāra* is one who is in perfect identity with the Divine. This is possible only when he becomes so pure and selfless that there is no limitation to make him an individual. He becomes God Himself, working through an individual's body for the regeneration of man. Sri Ramakrishna once asked Mahendra Nath Gupta, the compiler of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* as to how much of ego he (Sri Ramakrishna) had got in him. Mahendra Nath replied that Sri Ramakrishna had kept only a little ego for the good of the world. Sri Ramakrishna corrected Mahendra Nath saying that it was not he who had retained the ego, but the Mother Herself had kept it in him.<sup>13</sup> Such is the ideal that was given to the world through Sri Ramakrishna.

### Sri Ramakrishna—An Ideal for All

There will be enough evidence from the life of Sri Ramakrishna to show us how we have to grow spiritually. His whole life is a life that is dedicated to the salvation of mankind from beginning to end. Sri Ramakrishna himself says that every incident of his eventful life is meant for setting a standard and an

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<sup>12</sup> cf. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 846

<sup>13</sup> cf. *ibid.*, p. 505

example for others to follow. So, not a single instance of his life can be considered to be in vain. Everything is an illustration to others.

For instance, Sri Ramakrishna would humorously raise the topic of his marriage sometimes. He used to discuss about why he married. People could not understand what the reason was. He had no need of a wife. Yet, why did he marry? He mentioned that every individual has to go through various purificatory rites, and marriage was one of them. But ever pure as he was, this cannot be the real explanation.

The author of the *Great Master* says that Sri Ramakrishna was placing these examples before humanity. It is to set an example before others as to how one can be absolutely pure, and remain absorbed in God even in married life.<sup>14</sup> The author says Sri Ramakrishna is an ideal both for monks and householders. Sri Ramakrishna can be very easily considered a monk. From the very beginning of his life, Sri Ramakrishna did nothing that compromised with his spirit of renunciation. But can he be an ideal for a householder too?

Sri Ramakrishna did never shirk the responsibility as a householder. Firstly, he did his duty to his mother right up to the last moment of her life. Even when she was passing out of the body, Sri Ramakrishna was uttering God's names. He did not, of course, take part in the cremation of her body and the rites that followed, because he was a *sannyāsin* too. Here again, he never

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<sup>14</sup> See *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 466  
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forgot the *sannyāsin*'s ideal. Secondly, he did not shirk his responsibility towards his wife. When Sri Sarada Devi came to him, she was not well. Sri Ramakrishna made all arrangements for her treatment, kept her in the same room, slept in the same bed, looked after her and nursed her. A householder's life can very well be guided by this. However God-intoxicated a householder may be, he has his duties towards his family, his wife and his children. Pratap Hazra, who was staying with Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar did not go to see his mother, wife and children living in the country home, saying that he had no attachment for them. Sri Ramakrishna scolded him and commanded him to go and look after his family members. Swami Vivekananda, then Narendranath, pleaded for Hazra, saying that since Hazra was reluctant to go to his family why should Sri Ramakrishna compel him to do so. Sri Ramakrishna said, 'You do not know. His mother, wife and children are starving and that fellow is here, doing his meditation and *japa*!' Sri Ramakrishna never liked this idea. That does not mean that he was against one's being absorbed in God-consciousness. He himself was so, absorbed in God all the while. His point was that one should not be normally indifferent to the responsibilities towards one's family. But the case was different if he became mad after God. That madness is required. He used to say that a mad man cannot be held responsible for what he does or what he does not do. For a householder who is God-intoxicated to the point of complete self-forgetfulness, such family responsibilities naturally fall off.

## Sri Ramakrishna's Sublime Teachings

Sri Ramakrishna says that nothing can be attained without renunciation. He never made any compromise in this regard. We compromise when we are not sincere. Sri Ramakrishna says that nothing can be attained without being straightforward, without being one in body and mind, in practice and profession. One must be always truthful. The Holy Mother once pointed out that some say that Sri Ramakrishna's supreme teaching was the harmony of religions and she said, 'But I feel that renunciation is the most important teaching of his life'.<sup>15</sup> Renunciation is meant for everybody—either a *sannyāsin* or a householder. A *sannyāsin* should renounce externally as well as internally. But a householder can do only with internal renunciation. The latter can live in this world as others do, but in his mind he will be absolutely full of the spirit of renunciation and completely free from attachment. Sri Ramakrishna says, 'This is the truth I am telling you: Verily, I know nothing but God.'<sup>16</sup> That is the most important factor in his life. We have to remain always alert about this truth that God is the most important factor in our lives. Other things are secondary. Other things come for consideration only when we feel ourselves to be the body, to be bound by the body and identified with it. God is the one important thing in life, according to Sri Ramakrishna. This is the main teaching

<sup>15</sup> See *Teachings of Sri Sarada Devi the Holy Mother* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1989) p. 136.

<sup>16</sup> *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., p. 505  
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of Sri Ramakrishna. When told that we are busy with so many things, so much of activities and that these works are occupying us and that there is no time to think of God, Sri Ramakrishna asks us if we have tried to be God-minded at all! For most of us, the answer is, 'No, we have not!'

Sri Ramakrishna gives an illustration. Suppose we are suffering from toothache. We do everything, but our mind keeps constantly running towards that toothache.<sup>17</sup> Let our estrangement from God be like that toothache, constantly giving us pain. Keeping away from God is painful; that pain should be a hundredfold, nay, a thousandfold more intense than that toothache. Then, whatever kind of *samsāra* we are in, nothing can bind us; our mind will be always in God. A mudfish remains in mud but is not stained by that mud. In the same way, if our minds are in God it does not matter where we live and how. Our mind will constantly be absorbed in Him and nothing can stain us. Be in the water, but like the waterfowl which is in it, the water does not drench it. It just shakes its wings and the water is gone. Sri Ramakrishna wants us to live like that.<sup>18</sup> Whether one is a householder or a monk, the truth applies equally to all. A householder need not run away from his family. He should try to keep his mind always on God. He has to perform his worldly duties keeping his mind fixed on God. God and the world will not be in conflict with each other if one lives this way.

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<sup>17</sup> ibid., p. 605

<sup>18</sup> ibid., p. 472

Ultimately, when he is completely absorbed in that God-intoxication, whatever he does, he does for the good of everybody. His family will not be exempt from the benefit of that. That is what the life of a God-intoxicated person should be.

### The Need of Faith

Sri Ramakrishna says: 'Repeat God's name and sing His glories, and keep holy company; and now and then visit God's devotees and holy men. The mind cannot dwell on God if it is immersed day and night in worldliness, in worldly duties and responsibilities; it is most necessary to go into solitude now and then and think of God.'<sup>19</sup> In this manner, one can free oneself from bondage.

There is no pessimistic idea anywhere in Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings. On the other hand, he talks about some persons who do *japa* so many times and yet say that they are sinners, calling themselves '*pāpī*', '*pāpī*'. Sri Ramakrishna says that these people have no faith in God. 'One should have such burning faith in God that one can say: "What? I have repeated the name of God, and can sin still cling to me? How can I be a sinner any more? ..." If a man repeats the name of God, his body, mind and everything become pure.'<sup>20</sup> That faith is necessary. Sri Ramakrishna gives a lot of emphasis on faith. At the same time, he does not ask anybody to have that sort of blind faith which will take

<sup>19</sup> ibid., p. 81

<sup>20</sup> ibid., p. 138

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him anywhere but God. A blind man wanted to go to heaven. Someone asked him to hold on to the tail of a cow and will be taken to *Vaikuntha*, the abode of God. He held the tail of a cow and the cow started running. He was being dragged through the thorns and bushes and there were scratches all over the body. He was bleeding and yet thinking that he was going to *Vaikuntha* or heaven. Sri Ramakrishna says that this kind of blindness does not mean faith.

Tremendous faith is necessary for strict adherence to a particular path to the end. We must have unflinching faith in the goal. But, if we can have equal respect for the paths that others are following, it is so much the better. Sri Ramakrishna did not ask us to accept the truth of the harmony of all paths even on the basis of his own experiences. Rather, he asked us to go on experimenting on our path as well as on other paths. He taught us not to talk of the superiority or inferiority of any path before we are in a position to evaluate properly the worth of these paths. If we can follow the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, we can look upon the followers of different paths as fellow-travellers to the same goal as ours. This message of Sri Ramakrishna is of utmost importance particularly in these days of communal hatred and conflict.

### **Need of Spiritual Experience**

Sri Ramakrishna says that when one takes God's name and progresses towards God, he will gradually unfold the divinity within him. Unless he does that, there is no hope that he will ever reach the goal. He says

that he who does spiritual practice should occasionally judge himself as to how far he has progressed. When people husk paddy, they occasionally raise their paddy and see how far it has been husked. So also, one should judge oneself. If one has not progressed, all efforts are in vain; they must have been misdirected. Sri Ramakrishna's ideal is that God-experience is not for a life after death; it must be here and now. He gives an illustration for this: A thief has broken into a house and knows that just beyond the wall, there is a huge lump of gold. Will he go to sleep or try to break that wall and get that lump of gold? So, one has to be impatient that way. A true seeker of God must be completely dissatisfied with his present condition. He or she must make all efforts to 'break the wall', and have God-experience. That is what is needed. Sri Ramakrishna wants us to wake up to that life of Spirit and not merely say, 'Oh! I am taking God's name and gradually I shall realize God'. Sri Ramakrishna could never tolerate this 'gradual realization'. It would be just like a man who was trying to bring water to his field. If water has to be brought into the field, the canal has to be dug today itself; not tomorrow. This is what Sri Ramakrishna emphasizes repeatedly. He tells his young disciple Niranjan: 'Niranjan, O Niranjan! Don't you see, life is short and passing by? When will you realize God?' Sri Ramakrishna wanted to infuse such an impatience into others. We must never wait for God-realization in time to come. That is the first thing that we must have in life. All else is secondary.

## THE IDEAL OF THE HOLY MOTHER SRI SARADA DEVI

### Śiva and Śakti

Whenever we speak of gods and goddesses, we say that such and such a goddess is the Śakti (the Energy or Power) of some particular god. But that does not mean that Śakti or the female aspect and Śiva or the male aspect are two different entities. The concept of Energy and the possessor of Energy is found in the Tantras and amongst the *Bhāgavatas*. The Advaitins do not distinguish between Śakti and its possessor or Brahman, for according to them, the ultimate reality is non-dual (*advaya*) and hence all divisions are excluded. But there is Śakti in Vedānta and it is called Māyā. Māyā is also called *mulāvidyā* which is the power that veils the real nature of Brahman and causes *adhyāsa* or, ‘creates’ this universe which is unreal. ‘Indra assumes various forms owing to Māyā’s power’,<sup>1</sup> say the Vedas. The *Bhāgavatas* and Tantras hold that that very power with the help of which the Lord creates, preserves and

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<sup>1</sup> इन्द्रो मायाभिः प्रसूत्प ईयते ।  
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destroys the universe is called *Bhagavatī Śakti*. Sri Ramakrishna equates Śiva and Śakti: 'The jñānis, ... say that the acts of creation, preservation and destruction, the universe itself and all its living beings, are the manifestations of Śakti, the Divine Power. If you reason it out, you will realize that all these are as illusory as a dream. Brahman alone is the Reality, and all else are unreal. Even this very Śakti is unsubstantial, like a dream. But though you reason all your life, you cannot go beyond the jurisdiction of Śakti. ... Thus Brahman and Śakti are identical. If you accept the one, you must accept the other. It is like fire and its power to burn.'<sup>2</sup>

The Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi and Sri Ramakrishna are not two different personalities, but one and the same. Seeing Sītā in a vision, Sri Ramakrishna felt that Sītā was *Rāmamaya-jīvitā*, i.e. her whole life was permeated by Rama. He says: 'I saw Sītā in a vision. I found that her entire mind was concentrated on Rāma. She was totally indifferent to everything — her hands, her feet, her clothes, her jewels. It seemed that Rāma had filled every bit of her life and she could not remain alive without Rāma.'<sup>3</sup> Even so, our Holy Mother was *Ramakrishnamayajīvitā* — one whose life was totally merged in Ramakrishna. The Holy Mother has been described by Swami Abhedananda as, 'One whose life was totally dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna, whose joy is in the hearing of the name

<sup>2</sup> *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986) p. 134

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 346      Digitized by eGangotri

of Sri Ramakrishna and whose life is totally moulded in his ideas and ideals.<sup>4</sup> The Holy Mother's mind was filled with the thoughts of Sri Ramakrishna. She was nothing but Sri Ramakrishna inside.

### Making Everyone Her Own

The Holy Mother's speciality was her simplicity combined with profound spiritual wisdom. She had a special knack of applying that wisdom to her own daily life as well as in teaching others through her example as to how to live in the family and yet remain dedicated to the highest spiritual ideal of life, which alone makes life meaningful.

To the Mother, none was a stranger. She looked upon everybody as her own, irrespective of their worth. She never considered a person's worth in order to bestow her affection on him. Her motherly love flowed towards all. One illustration will suffice in this regard. There was a Muslim called Amjad, who was known to have been a dacoit. He got attracted to the Holy Mother and used to visit her with small presents. The Mother used to say that she did not make any difference between Amjad and Sarat. Sarat means Swami Saradananda, who was looking after all the needs of the Holy Mother and the other members of her family. The

<sup>4</sup> रामकृष्णगतप्राणा तत्रामश्रवणप्रियाम् ।  
तद्वावरञ्जिताकाराम्... ॥

'Śrī Sāradā Devī Stotram'

See *The Complete Works of Swami Abhedenanda* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1968) Vol. 7, p. 372  
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dedication of Swami Saradananda to the service of the Holy Mother may be well understood from her utterance that her burden could be borne only by Sarat and none else. Swami Saradananda, over and above this, was the Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission and was always mindful of the conveniences of the Holy Mother and a big family that always depended on the Mother. The Holy Mother said that Sarat and Amjad were equally worthy of her affection. We cannot understand the extent of the broadness of her mind which made her look upon everybody as her own children!

### **The Method of Her Teaching**

The teaching Holy Mother imparted towards the end of her life to her devotees is, 'If you want peace, do not find fault with others. See your own faults. Look upon the whole world as your own; for, none is an outsider. All are your own.'<sup>5</sup> That was her instruction to people who wanted peace of mind. Mother did help people spiritually, not taking the role of a teacher, but as a loving mother. Swami Abhedananda describes in the poem that he composed in praise of the Holy Mother: 'You bind our minds to you with the cord of love. You cleanse our faults and make us pure by taking us unto yourself out of infinite compassion though we are full of faults. What a wonder are you!'<sup>6</sup> The Holy

<sup>5</sup> See Swami Gambhirananda, *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986) p. 519

<sup>6</sup> स्त्रेहेन बध्नासि मनोऽस्मदीय

Mother used to bind all through her affection, and through her affection she used to reform others. She would transform all our defects into virtues. That is how a mother like her does; she will not scold, but through her love, she will bring about a transformation. Without the people's being aware of her transforming influence, they loved her and she loved them. Through that love, their lives became transformed. That is the way she elevated people spiritually.

If anyone asked her questions about things they did not understand, she would answer, 'I am a simple woman, what do I know?' But then, this simple woman was a great teacher, without ever giving the impression to anybody that she was teaching.

### The Spiritual Partner of Sri Ramakrishna

Sri Sarada Devi was the partner of Sri Ramakrishna in his great role of spiritual ministration to the world. She was indeed an active partner. Sri Ramakrishna came to the world to establish the Motherhood of God. He did not have a female body and therefore, the Holy Mother played a great role illustrating the Motherhood of God through her own Self. We will not find many examples like this in the religious history of the world where a couple was wholly dedicated to the spiritual well-being of the world in such a unique manner.

दोषानशेषान् सगुणीकरोपि ।  
अहेतुना नो दयसे सदोषान्  
स्वाङ्के गृहीत्वा यदिदं विचित्रम् ॥

In the beginning, the Holy Mother was very self-denying. She was always shy. But, Sri Ramakrishna wanted her to take up the role of the Mother. He worshipped her as the Divine Mother and that worship awakened her innate Motherhood. The Motherhood that was perhaps dormant in her, became activated and she actively took up that role, particularly after the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna. When she had to initiate Swami Yogananda upon the instructions of Sri Ramakrishna, she hesitated. She thought, 'People will start criticizing me, saying, 'What! She has started making disciples!' But, Sri Ramakrishna came to her in her visions for three consecutive days and ultimately she yielded.<sup>7</sup> That was the beginning of her spiritual ministration. Later on, large number of devotees would come to her, seeking guidance in spiritual life and she was ever ready to help them. All the same, she never posed as a Guru but lived like a simple village woman. Yet, what profound wisdom was hidden behind that simplicity is worth noting. Sri Ramakrishna left his great spiritual wisdom to her as his legacy. It was the heritage of serving mankind in their spiritual regeneration, and the Holy Mother never failed to carry on that sacred duty. Her entire life was dedicated to help people spiritually, looking upon them as her own children and raising them up without their being aware of it. The Holy Mother's glorious life is an illustration of how a human being in a family can be detached and dedicated to God.

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<sup>7</sup> cf. *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*, op. cit., pp. 143-44  
Digitized by eGangotri

## The Protective Mother

Sri Sarada Devi would say, ‘... As long as you remember me, your mother, why should you be frightened? Whenever you are in distress, just say to yourself “I have a mother”.’<sup>8</sup> The word ‘Mother’ does not mean merely the physical form of Sri Sarada Devi. It also means the undying presence of the divine Mother-Power that had been expressed through the life of Sri Sarada Devi. Yet, she never manifested her divine Power through outward states of *samādhi* as we see frequently in Sri Ramakrishna. They say that the Holy Mother was without any kind of outward manifestation of that spiritual eminence. The Holy Mother, although absorbed in constant God-consciousness, kept herself hidden from public eyes. Sri Ramakrishna was different in that respect. He would often get merged in *samādhi*. He had to quarrel with the Divine Mother, ‘O Mother! Do not make me forgetful of the people around me.’<sup>9</sup> But the Holy Mother always restrained herself from that joy of being in *samādhi*. She was ever alert towards the well-being of her children.

The Mother was the ever-obedient wife of Sri Ramakrishna. But, one day, when Sri Ramakrishna said that she was feeding the boys too much and therefore, the boys would sleep longer and would not have enough time for their spiritual practices, the Mother told him no to get upset because of their eating a little more and

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<sup>8</sup> *Teachings of Sri Sarada Devi the Holy Mother* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1989) pp. 163-64

<sup>9</sup> cf. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., pp. 237, 372  
Digitized by eGangotri

as regards their spiritual welfare she would look to their future. Sri Ramakrishna was waiting for that assurance from her.

### Hidden Behind the Veil

The monks of the Ramakrishna Order had been keeping the Mother hidden from the public eye in the early days. During that period Sri Sarada Devi was not known to many people. She was extremely shy, and even intimate devotees did not have easy access to her presence. She would sit with a veil covering her entire frame and the devotees would go and prostrate before her. That was her nature. Her photos were not made public. Even devotees would find it difficult to procure a photo of the Holy Mother. But after the centenary celebration of the birth of the Holy Mother—I put it this way—the Holy Mother unveiled herself. She has now come very much to the limelight. She has gone to the hearts of people not only in our country, but outside as well. During her own lifetime, many Western disciples of Swamiji regarded her as a Divine Personality. You will find some beautiful words of Sister Nivedita about the Holy Mother. The Holy Mother did not know a word of English and yet, there was a wonderful affectionate relationship between the Mother and Nivedita! Sister Nivedita learnt a little of Bengali gradually. But there was no need of language in their relation. Sister Nivedita looked upon the Mother as Mother Mary herself.

Swami Vivekananda, the greatest exponent of Hinduism, was thinking of going to the West for

spreading the ideas of Vedānta. But he hesitated and decided that unless the command came from the Holy Mother, he would not go. Even after he saw Sri Ramakrishna in a vision, beckoning him to go to far off lands beyond the sea, Swamiji waited for the Mother's command. When Mother's consent and blessing finally came, he decided to go to the West. Swamiji therefore wrote in 1894 from the U.S.A. to Swami Shivananda: 'You have not yet understood the wonderful significance of the Mother's life—none of you. But gradually you will know. Without Śakti, there is no regeneration for the world. ... Mother has been born to revive that wonderful Śakti in India. ... To me Mother's grace is a hundred thousand times more valuable than Father's.'<sup>10</sup>

I do not know if we have become fully aware as yet of the greatness of the Mother, but we can understand her simplicity, her sweetness, and the way she lived, detached and totally dedicated to God. She lived as an illustration of how a householder can be, with the family and yet absorbed in God. That was the Holy Mother's great message which we can learn from her life and teachings.

I pray to the Holy Mother that through her grace, may we learn something of that art of living in this world and yet living in God.

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<sup>10</sup> Letters of Swami Vivekananda, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1989) p. 182

## THE IDEAL OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

### The Personality of Swamiji

When Sri Ramakrishna appeared on the soil of India, a band of young men came and laid themselves at his feet, whom Sri Ramakrishna accepted as the messengers of the great spiritual heritage that he wanted to bequeath to the world. On the crest of the great wave that rose at that time was Swami Vivekananda, the spiritual child of Sri Ramakrishna.

Swami Vivekananda was a great personality, contributing in various ways to the enrichment of the world culture. His contributions covered almost all aspects of life. He was particularly concerned with the spiritual renaissance of mankind. His idea of spirituality was not limited to any particular aspect of life, but it embraced the whole personality.

Swami Vivekananda was born in India, for which we can take legitimate pride and call him our own. He is usually considered a patriot saint, who loved India and who tried to help India not only to regain her past glory but also to restore her to an excellence which would even go beyond her past eminence. However, his services did not remain limited to India alone. He said that it was by accident that he was born in India, and

therefore his allegiance to India was only natural. But his soul was too big to remain confined to a limited region. He was for the whole of the world.<sup>1</sup>

Even when he was young, learning at the feet of his Master, Sri Ramakrishna had said that Narendranath would teach the world. Nobody understood the significance of that utterance, because it was too early. Narendra was then known as just one of the Calcutta boys and none could think that such greatness was hidden in that young man. But Sri Ramakrishna had a great prophetic vision. He knew the greatness hidden in the life of his beloved Narendranath. Sri Ramakrishna had specially chosen his 'Naren' from amongst the young men to be the leader of a great movement that was to follow after his demise. Narendranath made it a determined resolve to dedicate his life for the great work that the Master wanted him to take up. He had such a largeness of heart that he never thought of his own spiritual eminence or his own salvation. He once said that he did not want liberation until the last man in the world was liberated!

Swamiji lived a very short life. It was less than forty years and within that short period, the great contribution he has made not only for India but for the whole world, we are only trying to understand gradually. We have as yet reached only the fringes of his glory. We do not yet fully understand how his message will gradually improve the condition of the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, (Digitized by Ganganath Jha) Advaita Ashrama, 1979) Vol. 5, p. 95.

world and make it a place for peaceful and meaningful life. The future will see the real effect of the advent of the great luminary that was Swamiji in the horizon of the world.

### **Swami Vivekananda the Student**

In the beginning, Swamiji was an eager learner. He wanted to know everything that was around him. He wanted to understand everything and the spirit of enquiry had made him unpopular, sometimes. People did not like this young man who seemed arrogant. Sri Ramakrishna alone understood the spirit that made his disciple so very inquisitive. There was an earnest longing for knowledge in Swamiji. Sri Ramakrishna himself was repeatedly questioned by this disciple on many subjects. Instead of being annoyed, Sri Ramakrishna would encourage him to judge everything, to test everything before accepting them as true.

Sri Ramakrishna did not go much into details while teaching Swamiji. He knew that infinite knowledge was all stored-up in his beloved disciple. It was enough to make Swamiji conscious of his potentialities and of the great role that he was to play in the future. Nevertheless, Sri Ramakrishna made Vivekananda undergo various austerities and intense spiritual practices. He was unrelenting in that. He wanted his disciple to be fit enough to carry the great message that he would leave behind for the world.

So long as Sri Ramakrishna lived in his physical body, the disciple continued to learn from the Guru. Finally he made a determined resolve to dedicate his

life for the great work that the Master wanted him to take up. He also enthused his brother-disciples to band themselves together and thus created a great organization, after laying its foundation on firm grounds of direct spiritual experience.

### **Swami Vivekananda the Teacher**

Teaching may be considered to be a way of helping people acquire knowledge of different things and there are innumerable subjects that are to be known. But the fundamental teaching that Swami Vivekananda believed in was that every soul is potentially perfect. Swamiji defined education as the manifestation of perfection already in man.<sup>2</sup> Every man is perfect, but he is not aware of the perfection. What the teacher has to do is to make his pupil become aware of his inherent perfection. An ordinary teacher thinks of his pupils as boys whose minds are *tabula rasa* (blank slate) on which he has to write what he deems fit. He feels that his pupils are lumps of clay for him to model forms according to his liking. That is the common notion. But Swamiji held an altogether different view. He says that every child has got innate perfection and it is for the teacher to pave the way for the child to manifest the innate perfection in him. That is the great Vedāntic outlook that Swamiji adhered to and this was the fundamental principle of his teaching. Swamiji says: 'We want that education by which character is formed,

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<sup>2</sup> *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 4, p. 358  
Digitized by eGangotri

strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded and by which one can stand on one's own feet.'<sup>3</sup> He again says: 'Education is not the amount of information that is put into your brain and runs riot there, undigested, all your life.'<sup>4</sup> This outlook makes everything very different from the commonly accepted view, that the child has to be taught everything by the teacher.

Swamiji was not always conscious that he was a great teacher of man, but wherever he went, people found a Teacher in him. People saw in him an immense treasure of knowledge, wisdom and light that comes from God realization. He spent his whole life teaching the ultimate knowledge, by knowing which everything becomes known; by knowing which all problems are solved.

### Swami Vivekananda the Traveller

After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, like many other brother-disciples, Swamiji went over the length and breadth of India. He met princes in their palaces and beggars in their huts alike. He studied the people of India, their very confusing customs, dogmas, etc. He meditated on the factors behind the degeneration of his nation. He also contemplated on what lay in the future of this great country. As the story goes, he sat in meditation at the southernmost tip of India, the rock of Kanyakumari. There emerged before his vision

<sup>3</sup> *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, op. cit., (1979) Vol. 5, p. 342

<sup>4</sup> *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, op. cit., (1989) Vol. 3, p. 302  
Digitized by eGangotri

the past glory of India, the present degradation and the future eminence. He envisioned that the task of rebuilding the nation would be accomplished by *sannyāsins*, and saw the future of India to be more glorious than its past.

Swamiji could not remain contented by merely thinking and finding ways for the regeneration of India. His Master wanted him to dedicate himself for the uplift of the whole world. His heart was so big and his sympathies so broad that they could not be contained within any small environment. They exceeded all limits, all boundaries. The whole world became the object of his service. For that purpose, he went beyond the seas. He went to America to represent the Hindu religion in the Parliament of Religions in Chicago. He knew none there. He had to live like a beggar without any resources in the beginning. Later on, he saw the great gathering of people, the great intellectual giants there among the audience and heard their ideas about Religion. There emerged another revelation to him: it was the grasp over the entire culture of humanity.

Swamiji was from the beginning a good student of history and a penetrating observer of the present situation of his own nation. He compared the affluence of America with his nation's poverty. He concluded that India was no doubt poor, but she was poor only materially, whereas the western world was rich materially but poor spiritually. He understood that the whole world was as much a field of service as was India. A great message for the entire mankind was forming in his mind and he felt that his great Master had

left him behind to deliver that message for the uplift of the whole world. He immediately dedicated himself to the service of the people of the world. He said, 'I have a message to the West as the Buddha had a message to the East.'<sup>5</sup> He had a message to deliver and he was in a hurry. He knew for certain that his life-span was not long.

That is how his future itinerary began. Wherever he went, he spread the great message of the potential divinity of man. As he himself used to say, 'My ideal indeed can be put into a few words and that is: to preach unto mankind their divinity, and how to make it manifest in every movement of life.'<sup>6</sup> Sri Ramakrishna taught it himself and nobody could accept the teaching as seriously as did Swamiji. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that if God could be worshipped in clay images or wooden images, can He not be worshipped in man where He is so much more manifested? That beautiful message Swamiji cherished in his heart and later on spread far and wide all over the globe.

In his vision there was no essential distinction between races and clans. They all were one for him. The whole universe was Brahman. The same divinity was everywhere. Only the needs of these potential divinities were different in different places. India was poor and needed education and material help. He therefore wanted that education must spread far and wide in

<sup>5</sup> *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, op. cit., (1979) Vol. 5, p.314

<sup>6</sup> *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, op. cit., (1986) Vol. 7, p. 501

India. He saw that traditional India was steeped in superstition. The minds of people must be freed from the shackles of superstition and ignorance, he thought. In the West, he saw affluence, but lack of spiritual ideas. The idea of the divinity of man was not present there. There was the idea of dignity of labour but not the idea of man's inherent divinity. There was awareness of social justice in the West. America was all along a Welfare State. But it did not learn to see God in man and help him out of ignorance about his essential divine nature.

Swamiji therefore thought that a new culture must develop through the meeting of the East and the West. It must not be merely a mixture of two cultures on the social plane. It must generate mutual sympathy and fellow-feeling among the two cultures of East and West and they must be blended into one. This would bring about a harmonious combination of material prosperity and spiritual excellence everywhere.

This was the prophetic vision that made Swamiji a world-teacher. He had a message for the whole world and he knew how to adapt that message for the crying needs of the different parts of the world. Whatever was needed in any place, had to be satisfied. But, all the time one should keep in mind this one idea: divinity of man. This divinity had to be awakened. Without the awakening of the inner divinity, man's suffering cannot be eliminated by any law, any kind of material affluence or any kind of social help. That was why Swamiji gave emphasis on Vedānta, the source of the knowledge of the innate divinity and the oneness of existence.

## Swamiji and Vedānta

By Vedānta Swamiji never meant the Vedānta that had for long remained just an intellectual exercise. This does not help to shape mankind in the right mould. He did not teach such an intellectual Vedānta, but taught 'Practical Vedānta', as he called it. If God was everywhere, if everyone was divine, one should behave in a way that it would lead to the realization of the oneness of mankind, or the Brahmanhood of the whole world. As Swamiji says, '...there is a great opening for the Vedānta to do beneficent work both here and elsewhere. This wonderful idea of the sameness and omnipresence of the Supreme Soul has to be preached for the amelioration and elevation of the human race here as elsewhere.'<sup>7</sup> This message originally belonged to the Vedas. But, it was never put into practice the way Swamiji did it. Swamiji translated this message into practice in his life and actions. If only we are awakened to this great Truth, the whole world will undergo a wonderful change.

So long as we are ignorant of the Ātman, the innate divinity in all of us, we make divisions between man and man, between races and races and between nationality and nationality. Owing to this sort of differences, we quarrel with each other and make this world a place uninhabitable for sane people. Swamiji wanted to remove this kind of difference and parochial outlook not by any kind of intellectual understanding, but by the

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<sup>7</sup> *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, op. cit., (1989)  
Vol. 3, p. 194

practice of true Vedānta.

We are all seeing this kind of narrow differences. How bitterly are we thinking of one another, what acute hostility is being felt and practised everywhere! This will never be removed by any kind of intellectual gymnastics or by forming legal unions. That will not be strong enough to cure the malady. The instrument, the mind is itself not cleared of impurity and of duality. Therefore we can never free it from hostility. We may only try to hide it with a thin veil of democracy. Swamiji therefore said, 'I want root and branch reform.'<sup>8</sup>

That is the idea of Swamiji and we have to consider him in that light as the Teacher of mankind. Swamiji was not a teacher of any particular religion or of any single creed. He was a teacher who wanted to change humanity in toto. The humanity of his dream would be all-loving, all-forgiving and sympathetic towards all. It will not do to have only fellow-feeling and good understanding. One must look upon all as God Himself and therefore think of their essential unity. That essential unity is the central teaching of Swamiji.

For the propagation of this idea Swami Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Order. He taught his disciples the idea of dedicating themselves for the good of others. Swamiji was not a reformer, a politician or a social worker. He was far greater than these. He was the great teacher of the fundamental unity of mankind. I, therefore, said in the beginning that we have not yet fully understood him.

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<sup>8</sup> ibid., p. 216  
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Sri Ramakrishna had asked Swamiji what he wanted. Swamiji had replied that he wanted to be absorbed always in *samādhi*. Sri Ramakrishna had rebuked his beloved disciple and said that he wanted his Narendra to be like a big banyan tree, under the shades of which people would take shelter. Swamiji understood its meaning and therefore, his whole life was dedicated to the service of humanity. Sri Ramakrishna's words that his Naren would be a world-teacher have come true. The spirit of Swamiji was that he would not seek his own salvation until and unless the last man on earth understood that he was one with God. This was the idea that he handed over to his disciples. This torch of *sanātana dharma* was lit by Sri Ramakrishna again and has to be handed down generation after generation for the rejuvenation of mankind. Swamiji himself has said that his work will continue for another fifteen hundred years.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Eastern and Western Admirers, *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda*, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1961) pp. 248-49.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SPIRITUAL INITIATION

### Mantra and Dīkṣā

The word *dīksā* means to take the vow of making a beginning. That is why it is translated into English as ‘initiation’, which means to make a beginning or to make somebody begin a certain course. The ends of *dīksā* may be different and its methods may also be various. The scriptures for instance mention *yajñadīkṣā*, the vow of performing a particular sacrifice with the aim of achieving something thereby. We shall, however, confine our attention here to the subject of Mantra Dīkṣā which means to make a person take a vow of repeating a Mantra.

What is a Mantra? A Mantra is a spiritual or mystic formula, the repetition of which brings about liberation from bondage of ignorance, i.e. liberation from the chain of births and deaths. That is the purpose of Mantra Dīkṣā. There is a great deal of confusion in our minds regarding what *dīksā* is and to what extent it is important in our spiritual pursuit. Many people seek *dīksā* without being clear in their minds as to what it

means and what should be achieved by this process. I shall treat the word *dikṣā* only in the sense of taking a vow of performing regular repetitions of the formula as prescribed by the Guru for our spiritual attainments. The word Mantra in Sanskrit is explained as *mananāt trāyate iti mantrah*. ‘Mantra is that by meditating on which one will be liberated from’ the cycle of births and deaths, from the ocean of *samsāra*, from the world of Māyā or ignorance. That is the etymological meaning of the term ‘Mantra’. And *dikṣā* means to make a beginning of this repetition of the Mantra in a particular process prescribed by the Guru.

### The Mantra Heritage

In ancient times ‘Mantra’ meant the verses found in the Vedas. The whole Veda consist of Mantras and Brāhmaṇas. ‘The word Veda implies Mantras and brāhmaṇas.’<sup>1</sup> Mantras are the utterances of the ṛsis with regard to various sacrifices; Brāhmaṇa refers to that portion of the Vedas which deal with the application of these Mantras. The Brāhmaṇas show how the Mantras are to be used in different sacrifices etc. But later on, in the Tantras, ‘Mantra’ gets a different meaning. The word ‘Mantra’ in the Tāntric sense means a special, mystic formula of words which signify some particular aspect of God. They are written in a language incomprehensible to the uninitiated people. Tāntric

<sup>1</sup> मन्त्रब्राह्मणयोः वेदनामधेयम् ।

Mantras are cryptic in form consisting of very pithy small syllables which signify certain aspects of God.

Mantras—whether Vedic or Tāntric—are believed to be not compositions of any human being. They are supposed to be handed down through a succession of Gurus and disciples. Both the Vedas and the Tantras say that Mantras are eternal. While the Vedas say that Mantras are revelations to the *r̄sis*, according to the Tantras, they are utterances of Śiva in answer to the questions put by Pārvatī. Śiva explains as Pārvatī puts questions. In the Tāntric sense, Mantra is a cryptic formula symbolizing a particular aspect of God. There are different Mantras for the different aspects of God. Mantra-Dīkṣā means the transmission of a particular Mantra by a Guru to his disciple. The disciple takes the vow of repeating this Mantra or meditating upon it.

The difference between Tāntric and Vedic Mantras is this: Vedic Mantras are shortened forms of prayers, hymns, etc. uttered in particular sacrifices for the propitiation of particular gods and goddesses, while Tāntric Mantras are cryptic formulas denoting a particular aspect of Divinity, say a *deva* or a *devī*. The Mantra Dīkṣā that we are having nowadays in India is mostly based on the Tāntric process. There was *dīkṣā* in the Vedic period also, some traditions of which survive even in modern times. As for instance, when the disciple enters the house of his Guru and is accepted as a disciple, he is initiated into the well-known *Gāyatrī Mantra*. Being a Vedic Mantra, the *Gāyatrī* is long in form. On the other hand, Tāntric Mantras are short formulas.

A Mantra is to be preserved very carefully so that no change may occur in its form and character. Nothing should be added to or subtracted from it. The Vedas are written down now, but formerly they were only handed down orally from the Guru to the disciple. They were called *śruti* and were only to be heard by the disciple from the *guru* and committed to memory. No change or editing of the *mantras* was allowed. No grammatical corrections were to be done. They were 'finished products', and the disciple had only to meditate on them and follow the Guru's instructions. In the Tantras also the Mantras are to be kept without any change and are to be followed very scrupulously. The secrecy of the transmission was rigidly enforced in the case of Tāntric Mantras. Why? It was believed that if such a rigidity was not observed, Mantras would not be as efficacious as they should be. If loudly uttered, the Mantras lose their potency; the Mantras are very powerful. They are believed to be efficacious in manifesting our spiritual knowledge. Through the repetition of the Mantra, the *mūrti* or the form of the Chosen Ideal representing the Mantra appears before the disciple.

### The Necessity of Guru

But nowadays the Vedas are available in printed form and anybody can have access to them. In the same way the Tāntric Mantras are also published in the Tāntric books and anybody can read them. But it is always enjoined in both the Vedic and Tāntric scriptures that such open access is not good. The Upaniṣads declare: 'Knowledge gained from a teacher

alone becomes fruitful.<sup>2</sup> If a bit of knowledge is to be made really effective in our lives, it must be heard from a Guru. Strict adherence to this principle has been enforced both in the Vedas and in the Purāṇas or Tantras. The idea behind it is that the Guru not only gives the Mantra but along with it he transmits some of the spiritual power that he possesses, to the disciple. When one reads the Mantras in printed books, this kind of transmission of power does not take place. Now, let us try to understand this in a more intelligible and rational sense. If we read certain ethical codes in a book, they may have some effect on us. But when we hear those ethical teachings from a person whom we love and revere, the effect will be naturally very different. Similarly, though we may not understand the actual process of transmission of spiritual power through *Mantra Dikṣā*, we can understand at least this much that it is only from a lamp that another lamp is lighted. It is necessary that to kindle a soul there must be some soul that must have already been kindled. That is what is meant by transmission from the Guru to the disciple. Without that sort of living link, transmission of spiritual power is not possible.

### The Potency of Mantras

Through this living contact the Mantra becomes more powerful. It is to preserve this power that our

<sup>2</sup> ... आचार्याद्वैव विद्या विदिता साधिष्ठं प्रापतीति... ।

scriptures enjoin a kind of secrecy on the part of the disciples and lay down rigorous punishments for those who infringe this rule. Of course, the purpose of this is just to prevent people from taking Mantras lightly or frivolously. One must take the Mantras very seriously. One should not experiment with them. They are very important in our lives. When we try to devote ourselves to the realization of God, we must know that it cannot be done in a light-hearted manner. The Guru transmits not only the Mantras but also the knowledge that he has derived through personal experience or through the experience of the teachers of that line and is therefore competent to teach the disciple in the right manner.

Another point comes to my mind in this connection. There are innumerable Mantras. If they are all placed before us, we will get confused as to which ones are to be accepted and which ones are to be rejected. To remove such a confusion the best principle would be to follow the dictates of a competent person who has direct knowledge of them. That person is the Guru.

Mantras are symbolic representations of divinity – God in the form of revealed words. There are instances of devotees mystically experiencing God in the form of an effulgent diagram or in the form of the luminous letters of the Mantra. This is, of course, an example of a mystic experience, and religion is full of such mystic expressions. We cannot always justify rationally these experiences which transcend reason. We cannot prove to the uninitiated people of the world that these experiences are real. The image of God may be a material idol, or God may be expressed through a word

or a symbol but these are absolutely necessary in order to attain God realization. The human mind can conceive of the Reality only through forms. It cannot conceive of the Formless. It may be asked, 'Have we to remain bound by forms for ever?' No, we need not. Through the forms we reach the Formless. We can never reach the Formless all of a sudden or directly without transforming our present state of mind. In the beginning our mind cannot think in any way except through forms or symbols. So, a symbol is absolutely necessary for spiritual practice and the Mantras are symbols representing divinity.

If we love a particular aspect of God, represented in a particular image, we do not like the image to be maimed or deformed. It is to be repeated as it is, without introducing any changes. Furthermore, we have to adhere to a single method of practice for the sake of concentration.

### The Glory of the Guru

In the Tāntric scriptures the Guru is said to be none other than God Himself. As it is said in the 'Hymn to the Guru', 'Guru is Brahma, Guru is Viṣṇu, Guru is Śiva, Guru Himself is the supreme Brahman; salutations to the Guru'.<sup>3</sup> The Guru is supposed to be none other than the supreme Brahman. Sri Rama-krishna used to say that *Satchidānanda*, the Ultimate

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<sup>3</sup> गुरुब्रह्मा गुरुर्विष्णुः गुरुदेवो महेश्वरः ।  
गुरुस्साक्षात् परं ब्रह्म तस्यै श्रीगुरवे नमः ॥

Reality, Brahman alone is the Guru. This is in conformity with the teachings of the Vedas and other scriptures. But when one goes for initiation one does not realize that one is being taught by that all-knowing supreme reality called Brahman. We approach an individual whom we choose as our Guru because we feel he is competent to guide us. That person has birth and death and other human limitations, and as such cannot be identified with Brahman. But our scriptures strictly enjoin on us to look upon the Guru as the Supreme. Does this not lead to a conflict between theory and practice? Yes, in a way it does. But then, it is just like our practice of worshipping God through images. We make images of God signifying particular aspects of Him. The image is made of materials which are non-sentient and we meditate or worship God, who is the infinite Spirit, through that image. Why do we do it? Because our mind cannot grasp the Infinite, the pure Spirit which transcends our thoughts. Therefore, we have to take recourse to a physical representation of It—either an idol or a picture or simply a symbolic diagram. There is no religion in the world in which God is worshipped without either an image or a symbol. If we do not worship God through a symbol, we cannot conceive of Him in any other way. Even religions that strongly advise the eradication of all images from the mind take recourse to some symbol or the other.

Is it necessary to go to a Guru to progress along the spiritual path? Obviously it is the practical approach. A Guru has to have certain qualifications without which he will not be able to direct the ignorant disciple. The

first qualification is that he must be a *śrotriya*, that is, he should have knowledge of the scriptures. But mere scholarship does not make one a Guru. He has to be a man of true knowledge, enlightenment; he must be a man who has realized the Truth. Secondly, he must be *avrjina*, his conduct should be above reproach. He should live strictly in conformity with the scriptural ideal. He must be free from all sins. He must be absolutely pure. Lastly, he must be *akamahata*, his relation with his disciple should not have any kind of selfish motive. He should be free from the desire of getting any advantage from the disciple by imparting the Mantra. These are the main qualifications that have got to be kept in mind when we proceed to accept any one as our Guru.

### A Disciple's Qualifications

What are the qualifications necessary for the disciple? The disciple must be earnest about the pursuit of the spiritual ideal. He must not be simply a person who just wants to have his curiosity satisfied by following the instructions half-heartedly. He must be serious about putting into practice the Guru's instructions. He must also be pure in character. Purity of character is stressed equally for the teacher and the taught. Above all, the disciple must be humble. He should not be proud or haughty. He should not approach the Guru or judge him without an attitude of deep respect. Humility makes the seeker a suitable vehicle through which the knowledge of the Guru can be conveyed. Without humility, earnestness, purity and

spirit of service, the disciple will not profit by mere contact with the Guru. That is why it is said in the Upaniṣads: 'The aspirant must approach the learned and illumined Guru with firewood in his hand.'<sup>4</sup> Firewood is a symbol of service. In those days the Guru required firewood for the performance of *yajña*. By approaching him with a load of firewood the seeker showed his readiness to serve his Guru. The important point is, not that by service the Guru will be pleased, but that service rendered to the Guru will make the disciple fit to receive the instructions. The spirit of service is needed for his own purification. He has simply to follow the Guru's dictates unquestioningly, with implicit faith.

### The Guru and the Disciple

Religion is not a business undertaking. Selfish motives mar the relationship between the Guru and the disciple. The disciple must be full of humility and in a spirit of service he must dedicate himself at the feet of the Guru as a learner — not as a person who is going to purchase his education by paying something to the teacher. Spiritual knowledge is a gift from the Guru to be earned through humility and spirit of service. The Guru initiates the disciple, starts him on the path of religion. Swami Brahmananda used to speak a lot on this subject. If you read his teachings, you will get much valuable guidance in this regard. He has taught without

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<sup>4</sup> तद्विज्ञानार्थं स गुरुमेवाभिगच्छेत्  
समितपाणिः श्रोत्रियं ब्रह्मनिष्ठम् ।

making mystery of anything.

Spiritual knowledge is not something that can be gained by study. It has to be earned through intense effort made with humility, perseverance and utmost faith. Faith is particularly stressed. When you study a book on science you need not have much faith. But when you study the scriptures, and particularly when you practise religion, a good deal of faith is necessary. There is a beautiful illustration of the need of faith in the Vedas. The disciple requests the Guru to teach him about Brahman. The Guru teaches the disciple saying that Brahman is very subtle and that the whole universe has arisen from It. To explain the unitary nature of Reality, he gives an illustration: just as when bees make honey, the nectar from different flowers gets inseparably mixed together; similarly all selves attain oneness in Brahman. After hearing this the disciple repeats the question, 'Please teach me again'. That means the teaching did not produce the required realization in the disciple. The Guru then gives another illustration. Again the disciple repeats the same question. The Guru gives yet another illustration; but the disciple again requests him to explain further.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately the Guru says: 'Dear boy, have faith'. Brahman is not a thing one can understand through illustrations. Illustrations are based on things which are visible to us or sensed by us. Here we are approaching

<sup>5</sup> श्रद्धत्वं सोम्य ।

something which is beyond the senses. So, a lot of faith is necessary to enable us to gradually proceed along the path. Without faith we will never make any progress.

Does this faith mean that anything and everything told by the Guru should be taken for granted? No, it does not. A real Guru will insist that it should not be so: 'Sri Ramakrishna himself strongly advised his disciples against following the Guru blindly. He said, 'Whatever I say, don't take them for granted. You must test them by means of your understanding as far as possible. Only when they seem to be cogent and convincing, follow them. Not otherwise.'<sup>6</sup> So it does not mean that we shall have to discard all our intelligence when we follow the teachings of the Guru. But we must not follow them with a sceptical mind, with a mind that is tainted with suspicion. Such a mind can never understand the true significance of the Guru's instructions. So, Sri Ramakrishna says that one should test his Guru, but once he is convinced that the Guru will certainly lead him to the highest goal, he must submit to him without any reservation. The Guru must be approached with that sort of faith. Then only a Guru can lead us to the highest goal. What will happen if a disciple goes to a Guru who is not sufficiently illumined? In the Upaniṣads it is said that they will be like the blind led by the blind.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> cf. Eastern and Western Disciples, *Life of Swami Vivekananda*, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1989) Vol. 1, p. 98

<sup>7</sup> cf. *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, Digitized by eGangotri

A question may be asked, 'We are not competent to judge others yet. Our minds are not clear. We are not free from doubts and difficulties. How can we judge our Guru who is much above us?' The answer is, try to ascertain as far as you can, the pure motive of your Guru. See for yourself whether he can act as an ideal before you; then accept him. When you accept him, do so wholeheartedly; otherwise your doubting mind will always create difficulty for you. Suppose your Guru has not reached the highest goal. There are instances in the Upaniṣads where the Guru admits his ignorance of certain things. Then both the Guru and the disciple go to another person who has superior knowledge of the subject. That is really the way of the Guru who is sincere and free from pretensions, and who is serious about the disciple's progress and welfare. In such a case there will be no tragedy like the blind led by the blind. Rather it will be like two fellow-travellers eager to reach the destination. They will ask other people for directions. Sometimes they may make mistakes, but they are sure to reach the goal at last.

I get a Guru who is the highest in my estimation. But should I need a still more capable Guru, such a Guru also would come to me, provided I am earnest. What is basically required is earnestness. We must seek with utmost earnestness and, as Sri Ramakrishna says, help will definitely come to us if we are sincere. This is the bare truth of spiritual life because the Guru is none other than God Himself. If we make mistakes, God knows that we are fumbling. He knows when and how

to shower His grace on us, how to bring Light to us. There is absolutely no fear even if we make a mistake, provided we are earnest in our search. That is the point we have got to remember. Without that sort of earnestness, even the guidance of an enlightened knower of Brahman will not be of much help to us. So, a Guru has to be understood as a guide who helps us gradually to proceed along the spiritual path, and who, in case of any confusion, arouses higher knowledge in us. That is the spirit with which a disciple has to progress in this path.

### The Razor's Edge

One thing is very important to remember: that the spiritual path is not very easy to travel. As it is said in the Upaniṣads, 'Wise men say that the path is difficult like the sharp edge of a razor'.<sup>8</sup> Our feet will be lacerated. It is a painful process. Nevertheless, if we have a heroic heart, we can proceed without shirking the efforts that are frustrating, the difficulties that block the way. Strong determination and faith are absolutely necessary on the part of a seeker of God. Spiritual seeking is not like seeking knowledge about material things which can be experimented upon by our senses. In the spiritual domain we are in quest of something beyond the senses. We shall have to remember that there is no hope of our reaching the goal if we fumble on the way or become complacent. We must have that kind of patience which cannot be exhausted even by several lives of failures and sufferings. Of course, this

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<sup>8</sup> *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, 1: 3: 14  
Digitized by eGangotri

sort of perseverance cannot be achieved in a day or two, not even in a few years. But the object of our search is worth so much that even hundreds of lives may be spent in its quest. Nothing can be attained for which we have not paid adequately. Perhaps, in spite of our utmost struggle, the goal may still be so far away as to make us despair of reaching the goal. Or perhaps it may be very near our reach! Who knows when the good moment will come!

Many of us know the story of the ten virgins in the *Bible*: Ten virgins went out at night to meet the bridegroom who, however, did not turn up in time. They waited and waited and one of the girls said that the oil in her lamp was exhausted and asked others to lend her some oil. They refused and so she went in search of oil for the lamp. In the meantime the bridegroom came. Those who had enough oil and whose lamps were burning took the bridegroom with them and went to the bridal chamber. But the poor girl whose oil was exhausted had to go without that great joy.<sup>9</sup> So, that will be the case of the seeker of God who does not proceed with adequate oil of patience in his lamp. Our object of search is so valuable that it does not matter how much we pay for it. We shall never have enough money to purchase it. It is an invaluable thing.

There is a story in the *Vedas* regarding this. A man came to sell the sacred plant, *somalatā*, the juice of which is essential for the performance of the *soma* sacrifice. The person who was performing the *soma*

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<sup>9</sup> Abridged from St. Mathew's Gospel, 25: 1-12  
Digitized by eGangotri

sacrifice wanted to purchase that creeper. So, he bargained for the *somalatā*. He started bidding from twenty cowries up but was refused everytime with the statement, 'King *Soma* is more precious than that'.<sup>10</sup> The sacrificer staked all his possessions for the purchase of soma, but got the same curt reply. Finally, when he found that he would not be able to pay for it, he looted the whole lot of *somalatā*.

The same idea is beautifully expressed in the *Bhāgavata*; Mother Yaśodā was angry with Kṛṣṇa, because by his pranks Kṛṣṇa had caused annoyance to her neighbours. She found Kṛṣṇa to be a naughty child and so decided to keep him tied somewhere. Since it was the house of a cowherd there was no dearth of ropes. She brought one piece of rope and tried to tie Kṛṣṇa with it. But the rope fell short by two fingers. Then some more rope was added. Still the rope fell short by two fingers. All the ropes that were available in the house were then brought to tie him. Still the gap could not be filled. Yaśodā got exhausted. She began to perspire. Ultimately, when she was tired and gave up hope, Śrī Kṛṣṇa accepted the bondage. The meaning of the story is that we cannot bind God with any amount of *sādhanā*; He only accepts us out of His grace. This has to be remembered. Ultimately we have to depend on His grace. The consummation of all our *sādhanās* is complete surrender to Him and dependence on His grace.

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<sup>10</sup> भूयो वाऽअतः सोमो राजार्हति

## RAMAKRISHNA TEMPLE ITS SIGNIFICANCE

We believe in a God who is all-pervading. Nothing can limit His presence. Yet, we build houses for God. How can a house accommodate Him? However big the house may be, it will be too small to contain the presence of the Divine. Such houses of God or temples are built in different parts of India and elsewhere. And people have been offering their hearts' prayers to the Lord in these houses of God for centuries together.

God is everywhere, there is no doubt about that. But, if we go to search for Him everywhere, our minds will run about all around and will not remain concentrated at one point. We require a spot where we can try to collect our scattered minds and direct them towards God. That is why temples are necessary to provide us with such a congenial place. People go to temples with the sole aim of worshipping the Divine in an atmosphere charged with the living presence of God.

### What Temples Stand for

A temple is not meant for the sake of God; it is for the convenience of the devotee. A devotee may concentrate his mind at a particular place for offering

prayers to God. Every temple is such a place where we can pray to God and sing His glories with love and devotion. Therefore the idea behind the temple is that the Lord may be worshipped in a concrete form there. In fact, this is built as a holy shrine of God where the devotees go and try to rid themselves of their lower worldly desires.

A temple stands for spiritual culture. It is a symbol in brick and mortar of the Divine form installed therein. Here people develop their spiritual lives and many indeed realize their divine nature also. If holy men live in these temples, they draw inspiration for themselves and also make the place more inspiring for others by their own holy and divine lives. Spirituality must be kept alive in these temples so that they can always remain a source of inspiration for others. Those who are holy make the places of pilgrimage holier by their presence, by their *sādhanā*. Through the rituals performed in temples, the deity becomes a living presence. This is called the 'awakening of God'. This awakened presence of Divinity answers the earnest prayers of devotees.

Sincere devotees struggle to realize their divine nature in the heart of hearts. But, the Lord is more or less asleep as it were in most of us. Not having felt the joy of the eternal presence of God inside us, we do not feel interested in seeking God inside. Many a time we give up *sādhanā*. After making some effort we give up and become preoccupied with the joys and sorrows of the world and totally forget the Lord. To avoid this, we should go to temples, sit quietly there and try to cast aside our ego and listen to the message of the heart. We

are sure to find that our preoccupations with the joys and sorrows of the world to be nothing in comparison to the eternal joy that is experienced in the presence of God. So, it is the presence of the Divine that is the most important factor and for that very purpose we need temples.

We should, however, remember that a temple is not a commercial place. A commercial place is where people come, offer things to the Lord and priests come forward to act as mediators to God and exploit the devotion of the people for their own gains. That is not the idea of a true temple. Let us beware of such deterioration of the ideal of the temple. The temple is a place where the devotee spends his time in humble prayer, *japa* and meditation. It is not for the manifestation of the ego of some rich man either. It may have been built out of the contribution from both rich and poor. Temple is always a place for devout worship.

### Temples of Sri Ramakrishna

We are discussing here the significance of a Ramakrishna temple. Ramakrishna temple is a temple dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna. The Ramakrishna temple stands for the ideals that Sri Ramakrishna represented, the ideals that he has shown through his great life and teachings.

Apart from the ideals of renunciation and harmony of religions that Sri Ramakrishna represented, he wanted his disciples to be spiritual giants themselves and to demonstrate the highest goal of life for all. Not only that. He said later on that spirituality must not be

for one's own enjoyment alone. One must live the spiritual life so that he may be a source of inspiration to others, living for others' sake more than for one's own. Even spiritual life should be for the sake of others, as much as possible. Spiritual life should not be a selfish pursuit only for one's own salvation. It is good if one desires his own liberation, but that liberation will be impossible if he does not feel and work for the liberation of others as well. Sri Ramakrishna said that he would be born again and again until he could remove the miseries of humanity. Swami Vivekananda, his worthy disciple, said, 'I do not want liberation until and unless every other soul is liberated.'<sup>1</sup> This is the great ideal that Sri Ramakrishna bequeathed to his beloved disciple. And this same ideal has been handed down to us. The feeling that life is not for one's own sake alone, but for the sake of the whole world is the ideal that we learn from Sri Ramakrishna. Our life's aim will not be only to gain liberation, but the emancipation of the whole world from ignorance, the cause of bondage.

Sri Ramakrishna is now a 'great magnet'. Everywhere, people are being irresistibly drawn to the ideal of Sri Ramakrishna because Sri Ramakrishna came at a time when people were groping in darkness and needed something to hold on to in this life of misery, discord and painful existence. Sri Ramakrishna came at a time when we were feeling almost frustrated in our attempts at solving the problems of life. It is said in the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1979) Vol. 5, p. 137  
Digitized by eGangotri

scriptures that when the power of evil predominates and good forces become subservient to evil forces, God incarnates in human form,<sup>2</sup> so that He can give another lease of life to the spiritual heritage of the people. It was at such a time of degeneration of the moral and spiritual values that Sri Ramakrishna was born.

Sri Ramakrishna symbolizes the highest ideal of spirituality that is possible for a human being. A living ideal was necessary and it found fulfilment in Sri Ramakrishna. Such an ideal is very much needed for the world of today. A temple dedicated to him means that the hearts of the devotees who will come to the temple will be dedicated to the ideals of Sri Ramakrishna. These ideals of Sri Ramakrishna are the perennial source of strength for the people of this age and also for those that will come later on. The temple dedicated to such an ideal shows the concentrated devotion of the devotees who built the temple for him.

### What Such Temples Must Be

The temple dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna should be a place which will inspire the devotees with the ideals to which Sri Ramakrishna dedicated himself. The devotees should feel inspired for living a higher life in the holy presence of Sri Ramakrishna in such a temple. Sri Ramakrishna says that God especially manifests Himself in the hearts of the devotees.<sup>3</sup> It is the sincere

<sup>2</sup> cf. *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 4:7

<sup>3</sup> See *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986), p. 133  
Digitized by eGangotri

hearts of the devotees that are behind the building of God's temple. It is through their hearts' desire to have a temple built that will reflect their ideal that these temples come up. It is a matter of great inspiration when all devotees come together and collectively offer their prayers to Sri Ramakrishna. Such an occasion brings a spiritual charge in the atmosphere. It creates the atmosphere of the living presence of Sri Ramakrishna.

We have got temples all over India. Many of them are found to be utterly neglected. Perhaps these temples, though sources of inspiration for some time, were neglected when the spiritual tradition was lost. What is the use of having such dilapidated temples? This is what one has to guard oneself against. The temples dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna must always remain places full of divine inspiration for all devotees wherever they may come from. They should feel there peace and joy in the holy presence of Sri Ramakrishna. The devotees of Sri Ramakrishna should have this one idea that everyday or as many days as it is possible for them, they should come to the temple and offer their prayers to the Lord either individually or collectively. Let the spirit be growing more and more forceful so that the inspiration will be irresistible. Every stone of the temple should be a source of inspiration for the devotees. That can be achieved only by the joint efforts of all sincere devotees.

Temples become famous because they are able to draw people towards them. And this is possible because of the holy traditions behind them. Here, in the Ramakrishna temple, <sup>Digheshtan</sup> we should see that people come

with the sole idea of raising themselves up spiritually and filling their hearts with spiritual inspiration. Let there be devotees coming here with pious heart, with humility and with the idea of praying here, sit here in meditation and keep the place quiet and peaceful. People should come and sit in the temple and should be careful not to cause any inconvenience to other devotees who come there. Prayers should be offered without disturbing anybody and that is how people who come here can find peace they need, the peace that will draw them together and the peace that is born of love of God, or of an earnest desire for reaching the highest goal of life, namely God-realization. When we have love for God, it will manifest itself through our hearts being open to everybody, healing the miseries of all people, and trying to help them get rid of their evil tendencies. Sri Ramakrishna stood for that ideal.

May Sri Ramakrishna help us reach that ideal ourselves and may he make us fit instruments in his hand to bring about the great regeneration of the world which was the aim of his life.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF RENUNCIATION

### The Sannyāsa Ideal

In our scriptures we find that great emphasis has been laid on the life of renunciation. It is supposed to be the climax of one's spiritual efforts at reaching the supreme goal. However, renunciation of everything, known as *sannyāsa* is understood by different persons in different ways. In Vedic literature four *āśramas* or life-stages have been mentioned, namely Brahmacarya, Gārhasthya, Vānaprastha and Sannyāsa, the fourth and the last being considered the highest stage. Again, *sannyāsa* has been interpreted as a state of spiritual realization, called *vidvat sannyāsa*. When a man reaches a high state of enlightenment, he behaves in a particular way, and this is considered to be the state of *sannyāsa* as distinguished from the *sannyāsa-āśrama* or the fourth stage of life that has to be lived according to the dictates of the scriptures. The state of *sannyāsa* can be reached by a man in whichever *āśrama* he may be at the time. In the *Gītā*, *sannyāsa* has been described thus: 'The renunciation of all actions motivated by self-interest, is stated by wise men as *sannyāsa*'.<sup>1</sup> As long as

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<sup>1</sup> *Bhagavad-Gītā*, ॥१८॥ Digitized by eGangotri

the ego has not been eliminated, as long as we think that we are the body, that we are individuals as distinguished from others, we narrow down the meaning of this Self and this narrow conception prompts us to do everything for our own gain. Renunciation of this kind of narrow selfish idea is what is called sannyasa.

### **Renunciation and Activity**

*Sannyāsa* is not mere giving up of all activity, which is not possible. Lord Kṛṣṇa says in the *Gītā*: ‘Nobody remains even for a moment free from doing any action.’<sup>2</sup> We have a body, and for the maintenance of the body we have to work. Even when you are not doing anything, simply sitting quiet, you are not, according to Śankara, in a state of complete inactivity. The very fact of your thinking that you are sitting quiet without any activity, is in itself an action. Because you are superimposing the body on your Self, the condition of non-activity of the body is superimposed on the real Self which is free from all superimpositions. Therefore, when you sit quiet, you say, ‘I am inactive’, ‘I am not doing anything’, as if that is an achievement. Śankara clearly states that it is not an achievement, you are only deceiving yourself.<sup>3</sup>

A man does not attain the state of *naiṣkarmya* (actionlessness) simply by not doing anything physically or mentally because no man can remain at any time

<sup>2</sup> न ह कश्चत्क्षणमपि जातु तिष्ठत्यकर्मकृत् ।

<sup>3</sup> See Śankara’s commentary on *Bhagavad-Gītā* 3:4

without any activity. To consider ourselves to be quiet, to be without any action, is in itself an activity, superimposing a condition of the body on the Self which is without any condition. This is a point that needs to be understood. Unfortunately, our misconception regarding this meaning of *sannyāsa*, and understanding the implication of the scriptures in this manner has been our undoing. Perhaps, for centuries we have been harbouring this wrong conception. The ultimate teaching of the *Gītā*, as Sri Ramakrishna has put it, is *tyaga* or renunciation.<sup>4</sup> Renunciation of what? Renunciation does not simply mean the renunciation of activity because, on the one hand, it is not possible and, on the other, it is not desirable. Neither should we give up all our activities, nor should we simply perform certain things aimlessly and say that we are active. Nevertheless, Sri Ramakrishna emphasizes that without renunciation nothing can be attained.<sup>5</sup> Renunciation is of the utmost importance, both for householders and for the *sannyāsins*.

Now it is to be considered whether the so-called *sannyāsins* who have renounced everything have really renounced all activities. Sometimes we take pride in being aloof from all activities. Is it a state which is desirable? Does it mean any special achievement? This is a point that has to be understood, and the teachings of the *Gītā* lead us to a correct understanding of it. The

<sup>4</sup> *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986) p. 104

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 647, 372

Vedas and other scriptures have been misunderstood in this respect. It was once thought that the Vedas enjoined *yajñas*, elaborate sacrifices, and penances as our ideal, as a means to unlimited enjoyment, eternal happiness and so forth. But in the *Gītā* there is a statement which directly contradicts such ideas of the Vedas. This misconception of performing Vedic rites with the idea of gaining pleasure of life here and hereafter is censured by Śrī Kṛṣṇa. According to him those people who have this wrong conception do not know the real import of the scripture.<sup>6</sup> Arjuna was afraid that, on account of the sin incurred through the cruel activities of war and destruction, he might lose his spiritual life. Śrī Kṛṣṇa carefully explains that it is not the action that is good or bad by itself but the motive behind the action. If you do a thing from a sense of duty without any selfish motive, your action can never be termed sinful.

### **Vedānta: Wrong Notions**

It is only when we identify ourselves with this material body of flesh and bones that we consider ourselves to be limited beings and work for selfish gains. But when a man is enlightened, he ceases to identify himself with his limited body and considers his Self as all-encompassing dissociated from the body. This is exactly the teaching of the *Gītā* with regard to *sannyāsa*. *Sannyāsa* is not shirking one's duties. It is not just keeping quiet without doing anything. That will not enable a man to reach any goal. Therefore, the *Gītā*

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<sup>6</sup> See *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 2: 42-45

advocates activity in the right and never inactivity. Swami Vivekananda said that *Gītā* teaches intense calmness in the midst of intense activity. He calls this 'Practical Vedānta'. Vedānta, of course, has been taught from time immemorial in our country. Here in India, even in ordinary people who have no education you will find wonderful ideas of Vedānta which they have learnt somehow. Vedānta is in the air of India, as it were. But we have forgotten the true meaning of some of the central doctrines of Vedānta or have given wrong interpretations to them. This kind of misconceived popular Vedānta is useless for spiritual progress. It will do no good either to ourselves or to others. It is not the Vedānta taught by the scriptures and particularly emphasized in the *Gītā*.

The *Gītā* is the earliest interpretation of the Vedas. Before the *Gītā* we did not have such clear exposition of the teachings of the Vedas. As we have seen, there were different kinds of sacrifices, and different kinds of ritualistic practices. A sizable part of the Vedas deals with them; but here and there, or read between the lines, we find one great teaching which can enlighten a man as regards his true Self. In the *Gītā*, we find all these vital teachings of the Vedas brought together in a systematized form. People do not know their real nature as the Atman. Considering themselves to be merely bodies, they behave in a manner which makes them constantly afraid of their apparent limitations. The teaching of the *Gītā*, though apparently for the enlightenment of Arjuna, is really intended to teach us the real import of the Vedas which is to give us

knowledge of our true Self and to regulate our behaviour in accordance with it.

We talk big, indulge in high theories, but fail miserably in translating the teachings into action in life. Therefore, we have to be careful so that there may not be any discrepancy between what we preach and what we practise. Our preaching and practice must go together. The *Gītā* teaches us how to live in the world. Our actions should be motivated in such a manner that instead of entangling us in this world it will free us from worldly bondages. 'Karma yoga is the secret of success,' says the *Gītā*.<sup>7</sup> Karma yoga teaches us how to work in a way which will not lead us to entanglement in this world but will free us from bondage. In ancient times there was in the minds of people the mistaken belief that if they engaged themselves in activity, they would get entangled or lose their spiritual ideal. That wrong notion the *Gītā* has set right. It is now for us to follow the teachings of the *Gītā*. If we do it, our whole life will change, we will think and behave differently.

### Swamiji's Ideal of Work

Swami Vivekananda has laid much emphasis on the teachings of the *Gītā* which he has placed in the right perspective. Thus the ancient truth has received a new impetus through Swamiji's teachings. In his talks we find a wonderful explanation of the cardinal tenets of the *Gītā* and rational ways to make them applicable to our practical life. Unless our knowledge and actions are

relevant to our modern life they have no meaning. Now, how to make our entire life, all our actions, conducive to the achievement of the highest goal as taught in the *Gitā* which has been so rationally interpreted by Swamiji? Life of activity and life of renunciation are not two different things but have to be understood together.

Having travelled throughout the world and seen the different societies and their behavioural patterns, Swami Vivekananda came to the conclusion that the extremely restless way of life in western countries would bring about their downfall because the people there have not been able to think deeply about what they are going to achieve by these activities. Before taking up any activity, its ultimate goal and motive must be considered. What is the goal that we have been trying to reach through these activities? Swamiji did not tell us to work restlessly or aimlessly. Though he preached intense activity everywhere, yet he was careful to mention that activity should not be simply physical movement without a clear conception of the goal to be attained through it.

Swamiji has taught us how in our modern world we can live like a yogi without running away from society and without living an isolated life. Wherever you are, you can live as a yogi. You can perform all activities as a Yoga by being internally detached from them, by working without any personal gain, doing everything for the sake of others, thinking that others are not different from you. With that knowledge firmly established in your mind, if you work for the good of all mankind, you are a yogi, you are a *sannyāsin*. Renunciation of selfish

action and selfish motive is what is called *sannyāsa*. Simply by not engaging ourselves in activity we do not reach the real state of inaction. *Naiṣkarmya* or the state of actionlessness actually means a state of consciousness in which we feel that we are not affected by any external condition. We are not changed in spite of doing all our duties. We remain mere onlookers. This is a conception that has to be gradually understood. But this gradual understanding can be achieved through the performance of our activities without any selfish motive. That is the first step through which we are to proceed. We may be engaged in intense activity outwardly and yet we can be free from all activities internally. This is what Swamiji wants us to understand and teach to the world.

We should read the *Gītā* in the light of Swamiji's teachings. Referring to his own *guru*, Sri Ramakrishna, Swamiji said that scriptures have to be understood in the light of his life.<sup>8</sup> Sri Ramakrishna was often immersed in deep *samādhi*; but when he was aware of the external world, he engaged himself in work with equal zeal for the welfare of the people. His ego had been completely eliminated, as it were, and what he did, and said was all for the good of humanity. Let us hope that through our devotion to these ideals, we will have a clear understanding of the message of the *Gītā* and of Swamiji's and Sri Ramakrishna's teachings.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1988) Vol.7, pp. 411-12  
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## GOD-REALIZATION

### Correct Concept of God

The word 'God' conveys to us an ideal which we can frame in our mind as the highest expression of the qualities that we ascribe to a being whom we do not clearly understand. This view is contained in Rāmānuja's definition of God: 'God is possessed of all good and auspicious qualities and free from all qualities which are to be shunned by the devotee.'<sup>1</sup> This is a very simple definition which may be acceptable to most people who are not much attracted to theorization about God. Theories are often different from our practical understanding. We like to indulge in speculations, use words which we do not ourselves clearly understand simply because such words are found only in our scriptures or are used by great teachers. Most of our concepts of God are based on this kind of approach. We are unable to conceive God truly because our minds are not pure. The simplest idea of God that we can have, is that God is the embodiment of perfect purity. But since we are not ourselves pure, we cannot

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<sup>1</sup> अशेषकल्याणगुणसम्पन्नः निखिलहेयगुणवर्जितः ।

understand what perfect purity really means. However, as we go on following that ideal, by stages we become purer and purer. As Jesus said in the *Bible*: ‘Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect’,<sup>2</sup> and ‘Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God.’<sup>3</sup> We shall have to have godly qualities in the fullest measure in ourselves; only then can we have full realization of God.

### What God-realization Is

This leads us to the next question: ‘What does God-realization mean?’ It means that God will be real to us to the degree to which divine qualities will be manifested in ourselves. That is, as we realize God, we become God-like. The more we proceed towards Him, the more we imbibe that ideal in our minds and, when we have fully achieved that state of perfect purity, we lose our individuality, our limitations, and become one with Him. Complete realization means complete identification with the Godhead, or elimination of the idea of separateness from God. This is God-realization in the Advaitic sense. But there are various other systems in which the experience of God is understood differently. There are dualists who do not believe in the complete identity of the individual (*jīva*) with God. But there is unanimity among all schools regarding the fact that the more we proceed towards God-realization, the more we shall be God-like.

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<sup>2</sup> *Bible*, St. Matthew, 5:48

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 5:8      Digitized by eGangotri

God-realization means an intuitive experience of the ultimate ground of all existence in which the seer and the seen become one. God-realization does not merely mean seeing the vision of various divine forms or having some higher feelings which may be described by different people in different ways. Complete absorption of the individual self in the Absolute: that is what Sri Ramakrishna meant by God-realization. As it has been beautifully described in the Upaniṣads: 'Just as pure water falling into a vast sheet of pure water becomes one with it, so also becomes the Self of a contemplative man who has realized God.'<sup>4</sup> That is to say, in that state the individual ceases to be an individual any more. He is not lost; rather he reaches the highest fulfilment of his spiritual progress, he becomes the Absolute himself. This experience of unity is the real meaning of God-realization. However, there are various other forms of spiritual realization and Sri Ramakrishna has accepted all of them.

Moreover, as we advance along the path, our concept of the divinity also advances. As we evolve spiritually, our concept of the ultimate goal of spiritual life also evolves side by side. Without our own growth in spiritual life, God as an ideal cannot be correctly understood and we cannot realize that ideal in its fullness. The more we proceed towards the Ideal, the clearer becomes our understanding of the word 'God'.

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<sup>4</sup> *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 2: 4: 15

## Understanding the Goal

It is impossible to have a true concept of the ultimate reality unless we are nearest to It or unless we are identified with It. I understand a person only from my experience of the ideas that are common between us; otherwise, I cannot have a full understanding of him. And to the extent we are close to each other, we understand each other to that extent. God is so different from our limited, impure individuality, that we can never have a true idea of Him until we have transcended our limitations and have got rid of the impurities that we experience in ourselves.

That we are limited and impure, that we are being afflicted by miseries, that our joy is transitory—all these are experienced by us in our everyday life. Every moment of our existence we are experiencing them. But at the same time we have an intuitive idea of a life which could be higher, superior, nobler, purer than what we have at present. It is this idea which generates in us a feeling that there must be a Being superior to us who is not suffering from the limitations, the imperfections that we are subject to. That perfect, unlimited Being is our goal, because we all want to transcend our limitations. We are always suffering from our limitations, from a feeling of imperfection, and we are always struggling to transcend them. Whether we believe in God or not, this urge to transcend our limitations is the basic urge that makes us go ever forward. Even an atheist has that urge, and so he too tries to improve himself in whichever way he can for the time being. The urge to transcend limitations is the common urge in all

people and, when we make the attainment of that Divinity the goal of our effort, we are said to be religious. And to the extent we have absorbed the divine Ideal in us and have been able to cast our consciousness in the mould of that Ideal, we may be said to progress spiritually. This understanding is not confined to any particular theory or system. Both the non-dualist and the dualist accept it. It is only regarding how we transcend our limitations and attain closeness to God that there are different views which are shaped by the dominant tendencies in human mind.

### The Power of Aspiration

The second point that Sri Ramakrishna stressed was the importance of the yearning for spiritual life (*vyākulatā*).<sup>5</sup> He emphasized the fact that God-realization takes place not by merely following any particular path but through intense yearning for God. This emphasis was derived from his own experience. In the beginning of his *sādhanā* he did not follow any systematic form of spiritual discipline. He simply followed the yearning of his heart and through the intensity of that yearning he shattered the veil of ignorance and obtained the vision of the Divine Mother. From that experience he came to the conclusion that mere yearning, or mere longing for God is enough—provided it is intense—to give you God-realization. He gives the example of a child's

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<sup>5</sup> *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986), p. 190, 449, etc.

desire to go to its mother.<sup>6</sup> When the child is fed up with its play, it cries for its mother. Nothing else can then satisfy it. We must feel that kind of longing for God. When we feel that we cannot live without God, then only we will have God-realization. It does not matter how we seek, what path we follow. If we have intense yearning, we shall succeed.

### Transformation of Consciousness

There are some people who think that human limitations are not really present in them. They try to think that they are suffering from a sort of misconception about themselves, or that they are suffering from a bad dream, as it were. Through this process of discrimination or self-analysis, they try to wake up from that dream. This is the path of *jñāna*. There are others who regard the ultimate Reality as the supreme Person who listens to prayers, and believe that through His grace it is possible to overcome all sufferings and limitations and attain such a state where the consciousness is filled with the Lord alone. This is the path of devotion or *bhakti*. Then there is the path of *yoga* which holds that one has to intensify the powers of the subject to reach the Absolute. The fourth path, known as the path of *karma* is also directed towards the attainment of the same goal but the process involved in it is different. According to the traditional view, *karmayoga* means the performance of rituals and sacrifices prescribed by the Vedas. But in a broad

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<sup>6</sup> ibid., pp. 337-38.

sense, it includes all actions and the basic process involved is to free the mind from selfishness. Through selfless work we transform ourselves, and when we become absolutely unselfish we acquire the nature of the ideal. Then, there is the path of meditation. Meditation is of course common to the paths of devotion as well as of knowledge. But a devotee does not consciously try to transform himself into the nature of the divine person whom he adores. The transformation comes without his seeking it. Nevertheless, the more one thinks of God, the more he becomes God-like. Śankara explains the word *upāsanā* (meditation) as *upagamya āsanam, cintanam*: ‘Approaching the ideal, and constantly thinking of it.’<sup>7</sup> As we mentally approach the ideal, we become transformed into that ideal. How long shall we have to do *upāsanā*? As long as we have not been transformed into the ideal. Religion is not mere thinking, but being and becoming; we transform ourselves into the ideal state, whatever be the ideal state we have in our mind.

From the foregoing, it is clear that although there appear to be several paths to God-realization, the basic process involved in them is the same, namely, transforming one’s consciousness and transcending one’s limitations. The attempt at realizing God has been going on from time immemorial, and people began to conceive of it in rational ways. Gradually different

<sup>7</sup> उपासनं नाम उपास्यार्थवादे यथा देवतादिस्वरूपं श्रुत्या ज्ञाप्यते तथा मनसोपगम्य आसनं चिन्तनं ...

systems of spiritual disciplines came into being. But they all share a common ground. This is the insight that Sri Ramakrishna brought to the modern world.

## The Path: Difference in Emphasis

Sri Ramakrishna never claimed that he had any new message to the world which had never been thought of by others. He only tried to give special stress on certain fundamental spiritual attitudes. Sri Ramakrishna gave stress on certain steps to God-realization. It is only in the way he stressed certain aspects of spirituality that Sri Ramakrishna differed from his predecessors. As a matter of fact, there is only one eternal path. As Śrī Kṛṣṇa told Arjuna, ‘The Yoga that I have taught you now is very ancient.’<sup>8</sup> Nor was Śrī Kṛṣṇa the first teacher of Yoga; it had been taught by many others in still earlier days. At each period of history, a great leader of spirituality comes to remind men of certain particular points in the spiritual pursuit, certain ideals, attitudes, beliefs and practices which are more suitable for mankind at that particular time. This is the reason why the teachings of great religious leaders differ from one another. They are different only because of the stress given on certain aspects of spiritual life. Otherwise the paths are, in the last analysis, found to be more or less the same, although known under different names. Like Śrī Kṛṣṇa, Sri Ramakrishna too did not claim to have discovered a new path. The world teacher

<sup>8</sup> स एवायं मयिगिस्त्वा व्योग्यं ब्रोक्तुं पूरातनः ।

*Bhagavad-Gītā*, 4:3

that he was, Sri Ramakrishna taught the same eternal truth but emphasized some particular aspects of it which are more vitally needed in the present age.

In the present context, we are concerned with only the practical steps of spiritual life. The term 'practical' is significant, for theoretical speculations are endless and sometimes they may have no connection with our actual life. Speculations by themselves will not lead us anywhere. They become fruitful only when they are based on moral and spiritual training.

### **Prayer and not Speculation**

Our minds are differently constituted. That is why our concept of divinity and the paths we should follow to reach that divinity must be different. Spiritual unfoldment in each person takes place in accordance with his own inherent tendencies. When large number of people think of Reality, there will naturally be some similarities in their way of thinking. These similarities can be classified into groups or systems of philosophy. Religious sects are based on this kind of classification.

Now, according to Sri Ramakrishna, these varieties in spiritual understanding need not be a confusing factor. He stressed actual living, not speculation. He asked people to pray to God to reveal Himself. 'What will you achieve by mere reasoning? Be restless for God and learn to love Him.... You may indulge in reasoning and discussion, but if you feel no longing or love for God, it is all futile,' says Sri Ramakrishna.<sup>9</sup> In order to

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<sup>9</sup> See *Gospel*, op. cit. pp. 610-11, also pp. 215, 703, etc.

pray, you need not have a complex metaphysical concept of God, or rational proof of its truth. Whatever be your concept of God, if you pray with all earnestness, He will reveal Himself to you—this assurance Sri Ramakrishna has given us. It is a very practical way of telling us that we need not be confounded by the variety of philosophical thoughts and the profusion of religious sects whose followers are constantly at loggerheads with one another. They think that the system or sect to which they belong, is the only perfect system or sect and that others are imperfect or wrong. Each man should first of all follow his own path and realize the Truth. A person, according to Sri Ramakrishna, has no right to pass judgement on another path which he himself has not followed. We have no right to pass judgement on others, when we have not tested their views, tested their systems, especially when we have not tested even our own path!

### Unity in Diversity

When we listen to popular discussions on religion, we generally find that each man is following a particular ideal or a particular line of thought which is peculiar to him, without understanding or even trying to understand what others have to say. That is the dogmatic approach that we all suffer from. Sri Ramakrishna dealt a death blow to this sort of dogmatism. He said in effect: ‘Even your own path you are not sure of, how do you dare to speak of the truth or untruth of other paths!'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> ibid., p. 596. Digitized by eGangotri

So, we have to be more humble. We have to be cautious in our statements about things concerning God and transcendental facts. Sri Ramakrishna used to compare worldly people's talking about God to children's swearing by the name of God which they had learnt from the swearing of their elders.<sup>11</sup>

There is, however, one important point to note. Sri Ramakrishna did not merely advise people to respect other faiths. He himself practised them. Standing on his own personal experience, he could say that all those paths lead to the same goal. This statement is not in itself an original one. For, prior to Sri Ramakrishna, this idea had been expressed by several other spiritual teachers in India. The *Rg-Veda* says: 'Truth is one, sages call It by various names.'<sup>12</sup> The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* says: 'All waters lead ultimately to that one goal, the ocean.'<sup>13</sup> The uniqueness of Sri Ramakrishna lay in demonstrating this fact through his own life, his own practical religious experience. In the history of the religions of the world we have never come across a personality who did this kind of experimentation with different paths as Sri Ramakrishna did.

### The Place of Rituals

The one more practical point Sri Ramakrishna

<sup>11</sup> ibid., 208

<sup>12</sup> *Rg-Veda*, 1: 164: 46

<sup>13</sup> सर्वासाम् अपा समुद्र एकायनम् ।

emphasized was the non-essential nature of rituals.<sup>14</sup> He had himself practised all kinds of rituals. But he never forced these rituals on his followers, though he never said that rituals were useless. Rituals do have their value during the early stages of spiritual life, but one should not get stuck in them. All should seek to go beyond them. Rituals are not the ideal or the goal of a seeker of God. They are only preliminary steps to higher realization.

### Tyāga – The Imperative Need

Yet another point Sri Ramakrishna emphasized was renunciation. ‘Without renunciation, nothing can be achieved, my child,’<sup>15</sup> he used to say. However, he never said that everyone who wanted to realize God must renounce the world. According to him, the householder’s life also can lead people to God-realization, just as the sannyāsin’s life does. Rakhal’s father-in-law once asked the Master: ‘Sir, can one realize God while leading the life of a householder?’ The Master smiled and replied: ‘Why not? Live in the world like a mudfish. The mudfish lives in mud but itself remains unstained. ... Do your duties in the world, fixing your mind on God.’<sup>16</sup> The term ‘renunciation’ need not be understood in the traditional sense of giving up the world. According to Sri Ramakrishna, mental detachment is enough for the householder. His advice

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<sup>14</sup> *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., pp. 464, 584

<sup>15</sup> ibid., p. 502

<sup>16</sup> ibid., p. 246

is: 'Do all your duties but keep your mind on God. Live with all—with wife and children, father and mother—and serve them. Treat them as if they were very dear to you, but know in your heart of hearts that they do not belong to you. A maid servant in the house of a rich man performs all the household duties, but her thoughts are fixed on her own home in her native village. She brings up her master's children as if they were her own. She even speaks of them as "my Rama" or "my Hari". But in her own mind she knows very well that they do not belong to her at all.'<sup>17</sup>

Renunciation is primarily a state of mind. If the mind does not accept renunciation, all your effort is useless, whether you are a monk or a householder. But, if you have an intense spirit of renunciation in your heart, you will be able to give your whole mind to God, concentrate all your mental energies on God wherever you are and whatever you do. You will then surely reach your goal, and no outer activity will be a bar to that.

### Sharing with Others

Another important point Sri Ramakrishna stressed was that not only should we have God-realization in our soul, but it should also be shared with others. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that there were some people who, when they get any good thing to eat, eat it themselves, wipe their lips and remain mum.<sup>18</sup> They have no wish to share it with others. Sri Ramakrishna

<sup>17</sup> ibid., pp. 81, 456

<sup>18</sup> ibid., p. 500

condemned such an attitude. The great realization that one attains in the spiritual path has to be shared with others. Only then will life attain full maturity. By sharing that realization with others, by helping others reach the same experience, our experience becomes fulfilled in the real sense of the term. Sri Ramakrishna himself took great pains to disseminate spiritual ideas among the people and to help them in pursuing the highest goal. If the first half of his life was spent in gathering the treasures of spiritual experience, the second half was spent in sharing that wealth with other people.

### The Greatest Optimist

Sri Ramakrishna is the greatest optimist anyone can think of. He never thought that a person could be doomed for ever. There is always hope for everybody. Even in the worst sinner Sri Ramakrishna saw the living presence of God. Sri Ramakrishna holds the hope of salvation for everybody. There is not a single soul for whom there is no ray of hope, for whom there is no prospect of God-realization. This boundless faith in man is the most striking feature of Sri Ramakrishna's message. He was a prophet of hope, a prophet of the ultimate victory of good over evil.

Sri Ramakrishna spread broadcast the idea that, wherever you may be, the divine Spirit is throbbing in you and waiting for an opportunity to manifest itself through you. You are all the children of God. Not only that; you are in reality God Himself. Only the veil of ignorance that covers the soul has to be removed and the inner light will shine at once. Suppose there is a

room which has been dark for a thousand years. It only needs the striking of a match for the darkness to go. So also, a man may have been apparently sinful for many years. But that does not matter. It is only a dream; he has been dreaming that bad dream.

Sri Ramakrishna's message gives you hope, encouragement and immense inspiration so that you will never feel satisfied with the condition in which you are. It makes you feel a 'divine discontent' and a yearning for going ahead. Never remain satisfied with where you are; go ahead, and stop not till the goal is reached, says Sri Ramakrishna. To illustrate this point he gave us a fine parable: 'A wood-cutter once entered a forest to gather wood. A *brahmacāri* said to him, "Go forward!" He obeyed the injunction and discovered some sandal-wood trees (by selling which he got a lot of money). After a few days, he went still farther and discovered gold-mine, and next, mines of diamonds, and precious stones. With these he became immensely rich.'<sup>19</sup>

Spiritual life has endless possibilities. The more we advance, the higher will be our experience. And the higher our experience, the greater will be our ability to solve our problems and the more we will find peace and joy in life. This spiritual quest must go on until our death. Only when we completely merge ourselves in the Absolute, cease to be individuals, and become free from all limitations, can we claim to have reached the goal. We have to reach that one ultimate reality which is the Absolute, without which nothing exists and

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<sup>19</sup> ibid., p. 109

beyond which there is nothing more to be attained.

### **Onward Forever!**

It is the ultimate goal which we have to seek, follow without wavering, without slackening our pace and without getting deterred by any adverse circumstances. Whatever that ultimate experience is, it is beyond words. It is so deep and transcendent that it cannot be communicated through words. In fact, the question of communicating it does not even arise because, in that state, other people cease to be separate entities. You become the whole world, and the sole expression of that one ultimate reality. That is the goal we have to seek. This goal may be experienced by people in different ways. Do not be confused by the differences of paths. Take it for granted that there are different kinds of experience because of the differences of experiencing minds. But ultimately all these experiences are meant to lead you towards the ultimate goal — the realization of the Infinite, Absolute Existence-Knowledge-Bliss, *satcidānanda*. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that everything in the world has been defiled by the mouth, only Brahman alone has not been defiled in that way.<sup>20</sup> All the knowledge that people boast of is, in fact, different kinds of ignorance, because they fall short of the ultimate truth. True knowledge is that which removes all distinctions between us and the ultimate reality.

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<sup>20</sup> ibid., p. 102

## THE IDEAL OF SERVICE AND THE RAMAKRISHNA ORDER

### The Root of All Suffering

Nārada was vastly learned. He went to Sanatkumāra to be enlightened further. With all his learning, Nārada was still not free from misery. So, he prayed to Sanatkumāra to teach him the way to be free from misery. Sanatkumāra asked him to let him know what Nārada had already known, so that he could guide him further. Nārada replied that he knew all the Vedas and all the Vedāngas—the subsidiary teachings of the Vedas—extant in those days. But still, he felt his knowledge was incomplete. Nārada said: ‘I am only a master of words, O Teacher! I do not know myself. One who is a knower of the Self is freed from all misery. Please teach me about the Ātman and let me cross the ocean of misery.’<sup>1</sup>

We all want to be free from miseries. As we all know, we are suffering from various kinds of misery—

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<sup>1</sup> सोऽहं भगवो मन्त्रविदेवास्मि नात्मविछृतं ह्येव मे भगवद्दशोभ्यस्तरति शोकमात्मविदिति... ।

physical, mental and spiritual. All these miseries, summed up, can be expressed in one word—ignorance—ignorance of our own Self. We do not know what our real nature is or how we are related to our surroundings, sentient and insentient. The trouble is in our ignorance, and the removal of this ignorance is the ultimate goal of human beings. We have to work out our own salvation and free ourselves from this eternal ignorance we are suffering from and help others do the same.

From the very birth, people who have the capacity to think have been trying to find out the way of removing all miseries and to reach the state of freedom from misery which will be the ultimate objective of life. Efforts are going on, and sometimes we stop to think and look back to see whether we have made any progress. Progress is never scheduled according to time. It can be measured only by the amount of peace and happiness that we have attained. So, our introspection will make us often gloomy on account of the slowness of the progress. In spite of the tremendous advance made by science and human knowledge in various fields, much ground remains to be covered in the spiritual field. We have to go a long, long way.

One thing is to be remembered; everyone must be aware of his own contribution to be made towards the collective progress of mankind in this field. Everyone must make sincere efforts so that he can advance towards this goal. Nothing can be attained in isolation. We have to free ourselves from the ignorance that makes us feel that we are isolated individuals, that we have nothing to do with the external world. That is the

initial mistake that we have made. I am as much concerned as everyone else in the welfare of others. Everybody is a part of myself and therefore, if anybody is kept in darkness or left alone suffering from misery and ignorance, it is me that is suffering. That is why we have to serve others.

### The Need to Serve Others

Service is a very important factor in man's life in society. We cannot live in isolation as mere individual entities without depending upon others who are around us. This kind of mutual dependence is the meaning of social life. Man needs to do service unto others to develop himself. Again, he serves others in order to uplift them. The world is very much in need of service for its well-being. So far as service to mankind is concerned, there cannot be any limit to the area or the kind.

The Upaniṣads declare: 'One who knows the Self is freed from all miseries.'<sup>2</sup> Ātman is the root, the cause, the ultimate principle and the world is its external expression. That is the relation between ourselves and the universe; this has to be clearly understood. Sri Ramakrishna was not a mere speculator. He wanted to see or experience everything for himself. That this whole world is an expression of the Ātman was not culled by him from books like the Upaniṣads or the Vedas. It was a direct experience that he gathered in his

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<sup>2</sup> तरति शोकमात्मवित् ।

life by great effort. He experienced the great truth that he and the whole universe were one and the same. There are instances in his life regarding this truth. When two boatmen were quarrelling and one boatman slapped another, Sri Ramakrishna, who was standing on the bank of the Ganga had the mark of that slap on his back. When somebody was walking on green grass with shoes on, Sri Ramakrishna felt as if the man was walking over his own chest,<sup>3</sup> and the mark of the shoes were seen on his chest. This sort of identity with the rest of the universe was directly experienced by him. Sri Ramakrishna used to feel that God is present in every being. 'Is God there only when I close my eyes? Is He not there when I open them?' — he would ask.<sup>4</sup> Though he saw God manifested everywhere, in human beings he found this manifestation at its best.

Divinity finds expression in man in a very prominent manner, much more clearly than when it is manifested in other things. That is why Sri Ramakrishna said that if God can be worshipped in images made of stone or wood etc., why can He not be worshipped in human beings where He is so prominently manifested? It was from this idea expressed by Sri Ramakrishna that Swami Vivekananda later developed his twin ideals as the motto of the Ramakrishna Order: 'For the

<sup>3</sup> See Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1991) Vol. 1, p. 301

<sup>4</sup> See *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986) p. 778

liberation of the Self and for the good of the world.<sup>5</sup> Each one of us will have to achieve this sort of identity with the whole universe that Sri Ramakrishna achieved. Then alone is true *seva* (service) possible. How can that be done? It can be done by concentrating on the universal presence of the Self or Ātman.

### How to Serve

Swami Vivekananda says that religion cannot be preached to a person who is starving.<sup>6</sup> One cannot understand spiritual truths in empty stomach. So, a man's physical needs have to be met first. Then his mental and intellectual needs will have to be attended to. Then only he can learn spiritual things. Serve with material things where a man needs physical help; if one needs intellectual growth, provide him with education and knowledge. If he is in need of spiritual help, give him spiritual ideas. Emphasis should be laid on the path through which people will be benefited in every way, both materially and spiritually. They should get better learning, better food, better clothing, better dwelling places, better social structure upon which to build their lives and they should also get the root cause of everything—spiritual enlightenment. This last one is the most important thing. Spiritual uplift means uplift of mankind as a whole and this was what Swamiji

<sup>5</sup> आत्मनो मोक्षार्थं जगद्विताय च ।

*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1985) Vol. 6, p. 504

<sup>6</sup> ibid., Vol. 5, pp. 379-80  
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wanted as the basis of our life and the highest kind of service, which he learned from the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna.

Sri Ramakrishna said that when we serve people, we should look upon them as representations of God Himself.<sup>7</sup> If we serve that way, we will never be filled with ego. We shall never consider ourselves superior to the people whom we serve. We should play the role of a worshipper and the subject to whom we are offering worship should be looked upon as God in the form of a leper, God in the form of a beggar, God in the form of a sick man. Everywhere this spirit should work. We should not look down upon anybody whom we are serving. We all belong to one existence. If we harm anybody, we are harming ourselves. If we see anything bad in any person, we should not look down upon him because, he is a part of ourselves. Wherever there is evil, it should be our duty to transform it into good. We should think of everyone as a veritable manifestation of divinity and that is the only spirit with which we should work. If we serve in this way, it will save us from the pitfall of arrogance and it will also guide us towards the highest goal, where religious and secular, God and the world, will lose their differences. They will become merged into one reality. The whole world will become a manifestation of divinity. This is the great ideal that has been preached by the Upanisads.<sup>8</sup> The whole world

<sup>7</sup> cf. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., pp. 380

<sup>8</sup> cf. ईशा वास्यमिदं सर्वम्

is in need of this great teaching which alone can save mankind from the imminent catastrophe of complete annihilation. We have to live our lives in accordance with this ideal and we have to proceed in the direction of total emancipation of mankind and complete regeneration of this world where spiritual and material will be merged into one reality.

### Sri Ramakrishna and the Order

The word 'movement' is a misnomer. There are so many kinds of movements. Nowadays we are tired of hearing about various movements. Most of them are political and the Ramakrishna Movement has nothing to do with politics. This movement is for the dissemination of the ideas of Ramakrishna- Vivekananda. Generally, the names of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda are used together with the idea that they are not entirely different personalities. Sri Ramakrishna is a great spiritual leader. People give him various names, and different titles. Some say he is a saint; some say he is a realized soul; some again call him a *yugāvatāra* and so forth. Sri Ramakrishna is now widely understood for having made a unique contribution to the world of spiritual thought which is the force that is slowly shaping mankind into a specially evolved society. The source of Sri Ramakrishna's ideas is entirely spiritual, but not spiritual in a limited sense. Sri Ramakrishna meant by God that all-absorbing existence, which comprises the whole of the universe that we experience and the universe beyond our understanding as well. He saw God everywhere and God's will in every action. He

understood the whole existence as one entity. His was a realization that God is in everything and is everywhere, even in sinners, in sufferings, in death and in all actions of life. He came not merely for this country. He came to show to the world a new way of life which would change the purpose of our modern life of rank materialism to the search of God within and without.

Sri Ramakrishna's ideas were subsequently elaborated and disseminated by his foremost disciple, Swami Vivekananda and later on, the other monks of the Ramakrishna Order. It was the spirit of Sri Ramakrishna which was working through the body of Swamiji. Sri Ramakrishna and his message have been elaborately explained by Swamiji through his vast literature. Swamiji's speeches and writings are now the nourishing source of the whole of India; nay, the whole world. Swamiji says, 'We must conquer the world through our spirituality and philosophy.'<sup>9</sup> It will not be presumptuous to think that today the *Sangha* has gradually evolved itself and become a great force for creating a better humanity.

### The Beginning of the Order

In his earlier days of spiritual growth, Swami Vivekananda wanted to remain absorbed in *samādhi*. Once Sri Ramakrishna asked him what his aim in life was. To this, Swamiji replied: 'My ideal, Sir, is to remain absorbed in *samādhi*. Only at times, when I

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<sup>9</sup> *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, op. cit., Vol. 3,  
p. 277 Digitized by eGangotri

would come down from that state I might take a morsel of food or so; and then again go back to *samādhi*.' Sri Ramakrishna scolded him and said: 'I thought you would be a far worthier soul! I thought you would be like a banyan tree that spreads its shade all around where weary travellers come and take shelter. Instead of that, you are also seeking your own salvation! It is selfish to think that way.'<sup>10</sup> Swami Vivekananda never forgot this teaching in his life.

Swami Vivekananda organized this monastic order in the name of Sri Ramakrishna. In fact, it was not Swamiji who established it but Sri Ramakrishna himself, during the last years of his life. A few years towards the end of his life, Sri Ramakrishna brought together souls who were capable of receiving the new ideas born of his own glorious life of renunciation and God-intoxication. In those early days, none of these boys had the thought of an organization in view. These young men came and surrendered themselves at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna. They thought that their only aim was to realize God, to develop their spiritual life, and thus get liberation and enlightenment. When these disciples of Sri Ramakrishna lived in the monastery of Baranagore, they were just a band of young men full of the burning spirit of renunciation. They did not have enough to eat and virtually nothing to put on. They somehow managed to live in a dilapidated house. And because there was not enough food, many of them went

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<sup>10</sup> cf. Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1989) Vol. 1, p. 162

about as wandering monks. Some of them were consumed by the urge to go to the Himalayas or some sacred place and live a life of contemplation. That was how they began their monastic lives.

Gradually the idea dawned in the mind of Swamiji that Sri Ramakrishna did not want them to be satisfied with that much only. To keep spiritual wealth only for oneself is a sort of miserliness. It is small-heartedness to think that way. Whatever wealth one has, it has to be so spread that people everywhere may share it. As a wandering monk, Swamiji had travelled from one end of the country to the other, from north to south and from east to west. He had got acquainted with the lives of all people, understood their difficulties and had felt pain at their miseries. This personal experience of human suffering urged him to dedicate himself for their well-being in all respects.

Swamiji had to struggle hard to change the ideas of his brother-disciples. Once when Swamiji was wandering in western India, accidentally he met Swami Turiyananda or Hari, another disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. Swamiji told him, 'Hari bhai, I do not know what your so-called religion is. But I feel my heart has become much broader, it can embrace now the whole of humanity. It feels for the whole of humanity.' That was what Sri Ramakrishna wanted him to be. To translate his ideas into practice, a well-knit organization was needed without which the ideas would not take root and will not be carried on with force and purity. But, Swamiji was a great student of history. He knew fully well the drawbacks of organizations, as well as their

good points. He wanted that the ideas and ideals should not be diluted. There must not be any kind of watering down of the ideas and their getting deteriorated into something which was not originally meant by Sri Ramakrishna. That is why this *Sangha* was built, so that the great ideas can be preserved with utmost purity. Even today the Organization is careful and watchful, especially about the life and conduct of its members.

### The Math and the Mission

The ideal of the Ramakrishna *Sangha* is laid down by Swami Vivekananda as, 'For the salvation of the Self and the good of the world'. These are the twin ideals that are blended together to meet the needs of the seeker of illumination. These two ideals are inseparably associated with each other. This is the foundation and the guiding motto of the Ramakrishna Order.

The Ramakrishna Math emphasizes the spiritual side, and the Ramakrishna Mission emphasizes public activities without being dissociated from the spiritual striving for perfection in life. Some of the Math Centres also do public activity or welfare work. Mission Centres of course do the same. Swamiji wanted this organization to be not for monks alone. Hence, there are householders also as members of the Mission who are inspired and dedicated to the cause of Sri Ramakrishna's ideas. Countless lay people are serving the people under the banner of the Ramakrishna Mission. Thus, these sincere and devoted people from the lay world are cooperating with the monastic workers to spread the idea of service vigorously and effectively to

a wider section of the public. That is how the movement is spreading.

The monastic life in the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition did not remain shut up within its shell. It became actively involved in serving the people everywhere. The Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission appear to be a small organization when we think of the vast work that we have got to do. Our monastic members are yet only a few, say, 1,400 or so. Among them, there are old monks who are incapable of doing active work extensively. There are younger people who are under training, and can be useful only after some years. The number of active workers therefore becomes much less than a thousand. And we have got so many Centres all over the world. There are nearly 130 Centres for which this number is rather insufficient. Sometimes we feel we cannot work as effectively and as extensively as we like to do.

Seeing this, we feel that more private centres (centres run by private organizations, not affiliated to the Ramakrishna Sangha) should come up. They have to come to our aid, and be imbued with the same ideas that we have. They should work in those areas where the Math and Mission centres could not be established so that the movement can spread more and more. Thus a small stream grows into a big river, while a current, when it goes alone, remains only a small stream. I remember when I first went to Amarkantak and saw the source of the river Narmada. There I found it just a small stream trickling down the valley. But, gradually various streams from both sides came and joined it and

after some distance it became the big river Narmada. That is how our Organization also started in the beginning. Only a handful of monastic workers started their lives together. Now, from the original sixteen disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, they have grown into a vast monastic power of 1,400. The number is bound to increase gradually and our field will also expand farther and farther.

### **Spiritualization – the Goal**

Today, the Ramakrishna Sangha is serving mankind in every walk of life. Medical service, education, relief and rehabilitation of the distressed, financial assistance, cultural uplift, etc. are a few of the diverse activities of the Organization to serve man. But, one should remember that it is not merely a social service movement. A social service organization has got the idea of improving the lot of the people only economically or materially or, at best, by improving their intellect. That is hardly enough. Ours is a service to help a man manifest his innate divinity. We serve Śiva in *jīva*. Unless a man is established in the infinite spiritual strength within him, his problems will not be fully solved. Problems will crop up in one form. He will try to solve that. Then, it will again grow in another form. It is only by the evolution of the whole being, the spiritualization of the whole personality that we can find the ultimate solution to our problems. People must be shown how they can get rid of their miseries and become evolved into beings full of light and happiness. It is in these lines that the Ramakrishna Order is working.

## The Glorious Future

Some of us may think it presumptuous on our part to say that the message of Sri Ramakrishna and the activities of his followers are going to bring a great and effective change in the whole world. But few of us know the force of ideas. Ideas become more and more powerful as they grow and influence many minds and lives. Then gradually they emerge as a great force, an epoch-making force for changing the whole world. Of course, it takes time. It does not happen in a day or two. It will take centuries, perhaps. But if we study the life of the Organization from its beginning closely, we see with wonder what tremendous world-moving force it has already accumulated in the course of the last hundred years. We are indeed going to be a great force in course of time. And that force will come not only from monks, but also from countless lay devotees of Sri Ramakrishna. Monks as well as the laity will contribute their quota for the enrichment of this global movement. Only a few centres of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission will not do. Private centres, inspired with the same ideals should crop up everywhere and carry the torch of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda in every nook and corner of the world.

Buddhism did not grow in a few years. It took nearly three centuries to develop into the powerful organization of Buddhism. When we look at the world's history we find what a tremendous force Buddhism became. Without any kind of political force joining hands with it in the beginning, simply by the force of Buddha's ideas, the movement expanded throughout

the world. Even today it remains a great force. The same phenomenon is happening to the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement. We feel certain that with the ideas of Ramakrishna a global movement is going to develop. There is no parallel in the history of mankind of such a tremendously powerful set of ideas, which could grow into a global force within such a short period. This growth is much faster than that of Buddhism. Today, it is not limited to India alone. If you go to the world outside, you will find many places in America, in Europe, even in Russia, where the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda ideas are deeply influencing people. There are universities where people are engaging themselves to study these ideas. Many scholars are doing research work on the subject. Today the movement has already become a remarkable force, and that means that we have got greater responsibilities placed on our shoulders by the will of Sri Ramakrishna. Since this great responsibility has come upon us, we should prepare ourselves to make effective contributions to the movement.

Ideas are there. Only they have to be made effective in life. And that can be done only by people who take to them not merely as a sort of speculation, but as a way of life. That is how the idea will be made effective. We see that already there are quite a number of Ashramas or Centres which we call 'private centres' running on similar lines. If we go to Europe and America we shall find many such Centres coming up there too without our direct participation in them. People are seeking these ideas everywhere as a practical way of life, not

merely for the betterment of their material life, but also for enriching their whole existence. Life cannot be divided into segments. Our whole being has to be transformed. Sri Ramakrishna gave us that force which can transform the whole of our being. It is up to us to imbibe those ideas and shape our lives to conform to them. What is needed is practical involvement in these ideas and enthusiastic struggle to realize them in our lives.

### The Hope of the Future

It is said in the *Bible*: ‘Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.’<sup>11</sup> Sri Ramakrishna has chosen us, monks as well as householders to translate his ideas in our lives, so that millions get the benefit through us. He has chosen us to be the torch-bearers of his great movement, and it must be spread to the farthest corners of the globe. Before that we should not have rest. It is true that we have achieved some little success, but that is nothing compared to the far greater achievements lying ahead of us.

Sri Ramakrishna, we firmly believe, came for the regeneration of the world. That regeneration means elevating the world from the present state of rank materialism to a better state of spiritual living. And that is what is called the divinization of humanity. This movement will grow more and more strong as time passes. As the torch-bearers of the movement, we too

<sup>11</sup> *Bible*, St. Matthew, 5:15

shall be the embodiments of the spirit of Sri Ramakrishna. The Organization's life means the life of the people who belong to it. They have to work wholeheartedly and unitedly with perfect loyalty to the ideas so that the ideas will not get mixed up with other thoughts. They must retain the same purity and virility as when they came from Sri Ramakrishna himself.

Let us spread everywhere so that we shall not only be doing service to ourselves or elevating ourselves, but through an inspired life of spiritual striving and dedication we shall be helpful to others. We help ourselves by serving others. Our life will be better and all-encompassing. In this way there will be wider development, not only of some individuals, but of the society as a whole. We have to be loyal to the ideas first, and practise the same with a spirit of dedication. We are here to do as much as possible to evolve ourselves as instruments in the hands of Sri Ramakrishna so that he will change our lives, and the lives of the people who will come in contact with us.

## REALIZATION THROUGH THE PATHS OF ACTION AND KNOWLEDGE

### Karma according to Śankara

Śankara observes in the *Vivekacūḍāmani*: ‘*Karma* is only for the purification of the mind and not for realizing the Truth. Truth is attained only through discrimination (or meditation) and not by millions of *karma*.’<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the word *karma* has been wrongly understood by the common readers of Śankara. They wrongly think that complete cessation of *karma* is the ideal put forth by the great *ācārya*. It should be remembered that he has condemned such an idea in many places. *Karma* has been usually used by Śankara in the sense of *sakāma karma*, that is, *karma* with selfish motive. The *karmas* that have been prescribed in the scriptures are the means for attaining some kind of *abhyudaya* or prosperity in life here or hereafter. By *karma* Śankara means these *karmas* only.

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<sup>1</sup> चित्तस्य शुद्धये कर्म न तु वस्तुपलब्धये ।  
वस्तुसिद्धिर्विचारेण न किञ्चित्कर्मकोटिभिः ॥

It is said that unless there is a motive behind it, *karma* is not possible. It is the motive that actuates us to do something. A little thinking will reveal that we cannot have a motive unless we have some desire; and again, we cannot have desire unless we have a sense of imperfection in us. The sense of imperfection can be there only when there is ignorance in us about our real nature. According to Śankara our real nature is the Ātman which is non-different from Brahman. It is our sense of imperfection that goads us to perform *karma*.

Śankara thinks there is no place for *karma* or action in the process of self-realization. In the beginning *karma* may be useful. As has been said, *cittasya suddhaye karma*—*karma* is for the purification of the mind. The mind has to be purified, and with this purified mind the highest goal has to be attained.

How far has *karma* to be carried on for the purification of the mind? This is the next question. According to Śankara, when the mind is purified, then only one will attain the competence for *manana* and *nididhyāsana*, intellectual understanding of the goal and deep meditation. *Karma* is helpful only up to this state. When the stages of *manana* and *nididhyāsana* are transcended, *karma* has no use any more. It has done its job and should cease as a matter of course. After this, the unfoldment of *jñāna* starts. As has already been pointed out, according to Śankara, *karma* cannot go up to the last stage of realization.

These three words—*avidyā*, *kāma* and *karma*—are used together. *Avidyā* means ignorance or wrong understanding of our real nature. *Kāma* means desire,

and *karma* means action. It is desire that goads us to do *karma*, as a means to the achievement of *abhyudaya* or prosperity in life here or hereafter. That is why we find in many places in the writings of Śankara that *karma* cannot lead us to *mokṣa* or liberation because *mokṣa* is not the *phala* or result of any *karma*. It is rather a state where all the *karmas* and their *phala* culminate and where there is no sense of imperfection. It is a state of fulfilment and completeness as it may be expressed in modern terms. This kind of liberation comes only through *jñāna* or knowledge.

### Karma and Swami Vivekananda

According to Swami Vivekananda *karma* can directly lead to the highest goal as knowledge and devotion do. *Karma* is not to be left out at any stage because the very purpose of *karma* is purification of the mind. When the mind is purified, what more remains to be done? Swamiji says that then the Reality reveals itself spontaneously.

Attention should be paid to this process. What is keeping us away from the supreme realization? — Impurities of the mind. That is hiding the Reality from us. One example will make it clear. The mind is like a glass screen covering the Reality. It has been covered with dirt and filth as it were — the filth of desire or *vāsanās*. Unselfish *karma* removes the dirt from the screen and makes it transparent. Then what happens? As soon as the glass screen becomes transparent we come face to face with the Reality. The screen practically becomes non-existent. It does not, rather

cannot, obstruct the vision of the Reality. There is no separating agency keeping the Ātman away from Brahman, the highest reality. Sri Ramakrishna said pure *buddhi* and pure Ātman are one and the same. Here *buddhi* means *citta* or *antahkarana*, or mind as we call it now in usual terms. It is not only Sri Ramakrishna who said this. Scriptures also give support to this view that, when *citta* becomes absolutely pure, we become one with the ultimate reality.

Śankara admits that *niṣkāma karma* makes the mind pure. Why *niṣkāma karma* alone? Even *sakāma karma* helps to some extent in this process. That is why it has found a place in the Vedas. This is because even *sakāma karma* requires some restraint on our animal propensities. Without restraining the animal propensities we cannot even perform the Vedic *karma*. Therefore, even such *karma* as prescribed by the Vedas for the attainment of some worldly objective, *abhyudaya*, is also a help in the process of self-realization. It makes the mind purer and gives man some control over himself. When this process continues gradually one becomes unselfish, and when one is completely unselfish, the mind transcends itself. It becomes free from all impurities and does not hide the Reality any more. This point, we have to understand properly. This is the idea of *niṣkāma karma* of Swamiji. He has given emphasis on this and it is consistent with the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. The Master too believed in that. Of course, Swamiji has given so much emphasis on this, that we sometimes think that it was not necessary. But if we look back to Swamiji's times, we will find that

people then were under the impression that any kind of *karma* meant entanglement in *maya*. An interesting illustration may be given in this regard.

Once in Uttarkashi a *sādhu* had cholera. When the other *sādhus* of the locality came to know of this, they simply fled from that place saying that this man would cause *vikṣepa*, distraction, in their meditation. Their meditation must have been wonderful! If they went to nurse the man, they might not be able to concentrate on their meditation. They might get some attachment towards that man. So they thought it better to be free from that attachment and leave the sick man to his fate. This sort of misunderstanding regarding *karma* was common in those days.

### Sankara's View of Naiṣkarmya

The *Gītā* says that mere cessation of all activities does not mean a state of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Knowledge does not mean inertia. It is not possible to be absolutely inactive at any stage of life, until one dies.<sup>3</sup>

So long as we are alive we have to be active in some way or the other. If a follower of the path of *jñāna* wants to be inactive, then he cannot be a follower of *jñāna* either because the pursuit of knowledge itself is a kind of activity; it is mental activity. Therefore there is not so much contradiction between the two as we ordinarily understand. Once a senior monk who is now no more, wrote to Swami Turiyananda: 'Maharaj, I feel any kind

<sup>2</sup> *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 3:4

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 3:5, 18:11

of activity brings in its train egoism, *ahankāra*. Therefore, I should remain free from all activity.' This meant that he would not do any work allotted to him. And the reply came: 'Do you think if you just abstain from all activity, your ego will disappear?' That is wrong understanding of *naiskarmya* or the state of real inaction.

Sankara has used the word *naiskarmya* in many places. The word *naiskarmya* or freedom from activity does not mean cessation of all kinds of activity, physical and mental: because only a dead person can be absolutely free from all kinds of activity in that sense. Sankara or any other philosopher would never prescribe something which would not be useful and practicable for living persons. According to Śankara *karma* means only that sort of activity which is prompted by *kāma* or desire. It does not mean all kinds of activity. Therefore, the conflict between *karma* and *jñāna* is only in the sense that when you are trying to be free from all desires, you cannot at the same time be engaged in pursuits which are prompted by desires. This is the main difference between the states of activity and inactivity.

But such difference or conflict between *jñāna* and *karma* does not necessarily continue eternally. When *karma* is not prompted by *kāma* or selfish desire—I emphasize selfish desire and not all kinds of desire—then technically it is not *karma*. Śankara is very clear on this point. He states: suppose a person has begun a certain Vedic sacrifice, a *sakāma karma*, with a desire to get result here or hereafter. He continues that sacrifice for sometime and before it is completed, the desire for gain disappears from his heart, but he just

continues and completes the sacrifice, only because he does not want to leave it halfway. But now there is no selfish desire at the back of this sacrifice; therefore technically speaking it will not be *karma* and will not yield any *phala* or result for him. So we see that action without selfish motive is not *karma*, according to Śankara.

### Jñāna and Realization

Now the next question is, suppose we are doing some *karma* without a selfish motive, will that not obstruct our *jñāna*? Will it not be in conflict with *jñāna*? Certainly not. It is not so stated anywhere in our scriptures. Then what about the verse quoted earlier that *karma* is only for the purification of the mind and not for realizing the Truth? According to Śankara, *vastūpalabdhi* or realization of the Reality can come only through disappearance of ignorance. And this is possible only when we rightly understand the real nature of the Self. The Self, according to Śankara, cannot be realized through any kind of *karma*. Of course, he excludes *nididhyāsana* and *manana* from *karma*. All other actions are not helpful for the realization of the ultimate reality.

What is realization? According to Śankara, realization means that kind of knowledge which is not mixed up with any doubt or any kind of wrong understanding—*asandigdha* and *aviparyasta jñāna*. Knowledge which is correct and without any trace of contradiction is absolutely pure knowledge. This is what Śankara understands by realization.

We often hold strange ideas about realization. By realization we often mean something coming all on a sudden in a flash, and the whole world being metamorphosed—a sort of miracle. Śankara does not believe in such miracles. He is a man who deals with hard facts. If we are to have that kind of knowledge about ourselves which is not mixed with any kind of doubt or error, it must be attained gradually. It does not come in a flash to anybody. It has to be attained through hard work. Inch by inch we have to progress towards this goal, and the goal is the extreme end of this process.

It is necessary to understand one important point here. Attainment of the kind of knowledge discussed above is not a mere intellectual process, it is a process which involves our whole being. In this process all the three faculties of our mind, namely thinking, feeling and willing, are deeply involved. When all these faculties of our being are put to work towards this one end of attaining pure knowledge and if we persevere to the end, then one day it may lead us to the attainment of absolute knowledge when there will be no trace of any doubt or ignorance in our mind regarding the real nature of the Self.

It is said that ignorance can be removed only through knowledge, and that knowledge means *brahmākāra vṛtti*, a certain state of the mind, which only can remove ignorance.

Therefore, Śankara says that *jñāna* and *karma* are diametrically opposed like light and darkness which cannot exist together. *Mokṣa* is a state which is

absolutely free from all desires whereas *karma* is born of desire.

### Jnana according to Swami Vivekananda

We have already said that according to Swami Vivekananda, the purpose of *karma* is purification of the mind. When the mind becomes absolutely pure then it becomes non-mind—*tatra manah amani bhavati*.<sup>4</sup> What makes the mind non-mind? According to Swami Vivekananda the process of purification itself makes the mind non-mind. At this state there remains nothing to separate the aspirant from the ultimate reality, and thus he realizes the Truth and becomes one with it. Śankara does not accept this theory in principle because he has to remain consistent with his theory and establish the supremacy of the path of Knowledge.

According to Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda each one of the paths: *karma*, *jñāna*, *bhakti* or *yoga* is fully capable of leading us to the ultimate reality. But according to Śankara, even devotion does not take one to the highest goal of non-duality. This is because, in that path you keep yourself distinct from Reality called *Īśvara*, and remain a devotee. Therefore the duality does not disappear completely in the realization attained through *bhakti*.

Suppose the duality does not disappear; there is no harm in that. For, if that duality makes the devotee low in any way, then only it should be shunned. If it does not, but instead, gives us a full view of *Īśvara* or the

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<sup>4</sup> cf. *Māndūkya Kārikā*, 3: 31, 32

Reality in *Īśvara*, then what is the harm in this state?

In the path of devotion we use the word *Īśvara* whereas in the path of knowledge we speak of Brahman from which this world has come, in which it exists and into which it will merge. There may be some technical difference between these two concepts about the Reality which might be of use to a pundit to show his logical skill and competence, but for all practical purposes the difference does not mean anything.

According to Sri Ramakrishna, a devotee can enjoy fully the experience of supreme love, the experience of the personal God forever. Śankara says whenever there is duality, there is a possibility—why possibility, a certainty—that the experience is a combination and therefore it must disintegrate at sometime.

### Śankara and Vivekananda

Not necessarily so, though it is the law in the objective world we are familiar with. This world is impure. But there may be a stage where the impurity completely disappears and the laws that are operative here will not be operative in that stage. Therefore whatever logic we apply here will not be applicable in that stage. Śankara also has to admit that kind of state where logic is transcended. Logic has to be transcended even to prove Śankara's concept of non-duality. When *brahmākāra vṛtti* comes, when one has the idea of non-duality (it is an idea only), that idea completely removes the ignorance. But what removes that idea? After all it is an idea, a *vṛtti*, and as such it retains some distinction. How does that distinction disappear?

It cannot disappear by itself. Some agency must be there to remove it. What is that agency? Śankara says, 'It simply disappears, just as *nirmaliphala* or alum removes all the impurities from the water and itself gets dissolved into it.' That is no explanation at all. However, it does not show the ignorance of Śankara. He tried to establish a position and he has done it quite correctly.

Now we come to the point of difference between Śankara and Swamiji. If the process of knowledge shown by Śankara can eliminate ignorance completely and make one realize the Reality and be one with it, then cannot *karma* also do the same? Of course, by *karma*, we mean here that which is performed without any selfish motive, *niṣkāma karma*.

Swamiji saw that in our country people were having too much of this idea of remaining aloof from the world so that they might become *jñānis*. Those persons who were the followers of the path of devotion were also trying to be aloof from the world owing to the same wrong attitude. This is not only not religious practice but definitely irreligious and selfish. It will only add more and more covers on the Reality within us. It will only make ignorance more thick and impenetrable. That is why Swamiji gives so much emphasis on *niṣkāma karma*—selfless work. Swamiji tells us that through the path of selfless work the country will prosper not only spiritually but also materially. What many people consider to be *sattva* is in fact deep *tamas*, the quality of darkness, just masquerading as *sattva*. This has to be understood carefully. They look alike but are poles apart in quality. We have to

carefully understand and remember these two different stand-points.

Śankara and Swamiji may apparently have some theoretical differences, but in fact there is no difference whatsoever. Śaṅkara accepts *niṣkāma karma* as a means to the purification of the mind and Swamiji also does the same. According to Śankara's system of philosophy, knowledge is necessary to remove ignorance. Knowledge brings about the *vṛttijñāna*, the idea of the Self. The idea of the Real alone can remove our ignorance about the Self. That is why it is said that this knowledge in the form of the idea—*brahmākāra vṛtti*—is necessarily the direct cause of realization of the supreme Reality. That is what Śankara states. Swamiji does not go into these details but says, purify your mind and you will gain realization. There is nothing to intervene between you and the Reality. You are the Reality; the mind itself when purified becomes one with the Reality—the supreme Self. It is because pure *buddhi* and pure Ātman are one and the same, as Sri Ramakrishna says. When the seeker completely purifies the mind, he will become one with what he is seeking. He is the Self the pure Ātman. That is what Swamiji teaches.

## AN APPRECIATION OF YOGA

### What Yoga Is Not

Sri Ramakrishna has a beautiful story to tell us about the acquiring of supernatural powers. There were two brothers, the elder of whom left home and went to learn yogic practices. After twelve years, he returned and told his younger brother that he had acquired great powers. The younger brother was interested to see some demonstration of them. The elder brother proudly agreed. They both went to the bank of a river. The yogi simply walked over the river water, straight away to the other bank! Reaching there, he saw his younger brother sail over the river by a boat and reach him. On reaching there, the latter asked, 'Well, what are the powers you acquired?' The elder brother responded: 'Didn't you see! I crossed the river walking over the water!' 'Yes,' said the younger, 'But, I too crossed the same river by a boat and had to pay only one pice for the trip. So, what you have attained by your practice of Yoga for twelve long years is worth only a pice!' Gaining supernatural powers is not the real goal of Yoga.

The word 'Yoga' has been generally misunderstood. Very often, Yoga is thought of as tricks performed by jugglers. There are tricksters who are

commonly considered to be yogis. Their performance is supposed to be yogic because of the uncommon powers they have gained by some means. We hear that there is a great yogi who is going to remain buried underground for a month — this we think is Yoga. This kind of supernatural powers may no doubt come to a yogi through his practices. The Yoga texts say that by concentration of mind such supernatural powers can indeed be attained.<sup>1</sup> But, attaining supernatural powers is not the goal of Yoga though unfortunately, that is how the word Yoga is understood. Anybody can thus become a yogi if he can do something unusual which others cannot do. But the *Yogaśūtra* of Patañjali or the *Gītā*, which are the sources of our yogic knowledge, never mentions that sort of trickery as the goal of Yoga.

### The Meaning of Yoga

Yoga, in its true sense, means that sort of tranquility of mind which will free us from the tensions we are suffering from constantly. And this tension is increased all the more where there is more of wealth. Yoga helps us acquire a state of mind which will be in equilibrium and will not be disturbed by the passing phases of life or the changing circumstances. Such a state of mind will be suitable for the highest enlightenment in life. That is the real purpose of Yoga. There are different kinds of Yoga such as *Rājayoga*, *Jñānayoga*, and *Bhaktiyoga*. *Rājayoga* or the Yoga of Patañjali, is considered to be the royal path. Also there is another kind of Yoga

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Patañjali's *Yoga-Sūtras* 3: 38-41  
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known as *Karmayoga*. These Yogas are all meant for helping man manifest his inner essence of divinity. The result is the same, namely, transcending our lower self and reaching the divinity within. This has been taught by various sages that we have to raise ourselves above the state of animality. As Swamiji says: we all came from God, and we have to go back to Him. And Yoga is one of the paths that leads us to Him.

We in India are believers in the essential divinity of man. But that belief has become only a sort of dogma, an article of faith. We never try seriously to apply this principle to life itself. That is the reason why in spite of such high-sounding words we utter, we are at a great depth of degradation. In our country, it is extremely painful to see that the land of sages and saints has gone down to such an extent of degradation that our younger generation has almost lost faith in the sacred heritage of our country. So, we have to look back and find out what was considered by our *r̄sis* as the way to safety for the entire humanity. And that safety is in maintaining a state of equilibrium in our mental and spiritual horizon. This equilibrium we have lost today. But there are means for regaining the same. And these means are available in the teachings of saints and sages and in our scriptures. It is here that the scientific process of Yoga becomes relevant. *Rājayoga*, or the Yoga of Patañjali, can raise us from a state of internal and external suffering to a better understanding of our nature and better understanding of our goal. This Yoga, therefore, has to be applied to the everyday life in our country, as also in the whole world. If the practice of Yoga is continued

seriously this Yoga is bound to raise us from where we are to a higher state of existence, where there will not be so much strife, so much conflict and so much misery.

### The Need of Yoga

The word Yoga, as we understand according to the sage Patañjali, is 'control of the mind'. It is the mind that makes us happy or unhappy because it is uncontrolled. Therefore, it leads to various kinds of miseries. Happiness, particularly abiding happiness, is possible only for a person who has controlled his mind so that it may not be scattered everywhere. In the Upaniṣads it is said that the higher reason or intellect should be the restraining factor. Our human life is compared to a journey in a chariot.<sup>2</sup> The higher reason (*buddhi*) in us is the charioteer who is seated in the chariot drawn by horses. The horses are compared to the sense organs. They are pulling this chariot of the body. These unbridled horses are to be controlled. Mind has been called the reins that hold the horses under control and direct it and the right direction is given by *buddhi* or higher reason as the charioteer. It is the charioteer who guides the horses to pull the chariot in the right direction. If the horses are not controlled, if the senses are not controlled by the discriminating factor (*buddhi*), naturally we shall miss the path and be ruined. It is only under the constraint of the mind which again is directed by *buddhi* that we can reach the desired goal. This is clearly stated in our scriptures as the way to achieve success in life.

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<sup>2</sup> cf. *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, 1: 3: 3-9

Our success does not mean attaining a temporary objective, because that temporary objective may not take us towards the ideal goal. Temporary objective may be anything, but the ultimate goal has to be kept in mind. Without our keeping constant watch as to whether we are losing sight of the ideal, the goal, we may be only distracted and led astray. Yoga is the unerring process directing our senses towards the final goal of realizing our divinity. It is here that Yoga has got relevance to our life.

### The Yoga Method of Sadhana

At the very outset, Yoga asks us to control our mind—‘Yoga is restraining the mind-stuff from taking various forms’.<sup>3</sup> It means the quietening of the mind which is throwing up constantly wave after wave of thoughts, desires—the *vṛttis*. They are constantly rising from the depth of the mind, from the depths of the subconscious, and we are unable to check the flow of ideas which are distracting us. That has to be controlled in a methodical manner. We have to practise whole-heartedly. Mind has to be trained, and in a methodical manner; that methodical manner will require our being established in absolute purity.

Purity and truthfulness are essentials for a yogi. Patañjali’s Yoga teaches the eightfold path: *yama*, *niyama*, *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, *pratyāhāra*, *dhāranā*,

<sup>3</sup> योगः चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः

*dhyāna* and *samādhi*.<sup>4</sup> So, first of all, the yogi must have complete control over the senses and the mind, and a proper direction must be given to the life's journey towards the final goal. That is what is absolutely necessary. So, Yoga does not mean any kind of physical control, nor even a mental exercise. We have to clearly understand what is the purpose set before a yogi. A yogi must be one who has only good wishes for everybody and harms none. The preparatory steps like *yama*, *niyama*, *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, etc. are absolutely necessary in order to reach the highest state of consciousness or *samādhi* which is not merely stopping the mental processes for sometime, but manifesting the divinity in man. It requires a lifelong attempt to continue in such practices in order to reap the highest benefit of Yoga.

A yogi wants to solve the problems of his life by making intense spiritual effort to become truthful, pure, compassionate and thus attain the highest bliss and peace. He sets before us an example so that by following in his footsteps we also can solve the problems of our lives by raising ourselves from the level of brutes to the status of divine. This divinity within ourselves has to be given expression. Yoga is the system which has given clearly intelligible means by which we can reach that state of complete divinity. We can evaluate a yogi on the basis of these terms alone: Has he been filled with eternal peace undisturbed by any change in circumstances? Has he been a blessing to the world?

I have dealt here with only a summary of what Yoga

<sup>4</sup> ibid, 2 : 29

should be and what it should not. Yoga is more for practice than for mere understanding of the system. It requires lifelong efforts to continue such practices in order to reap the ultimate benefit of Yoga.

## SPIRITUALITY AND LOVE OF GOD

### The Meaning of 'Spirituality'

The word spirituality is not a very clear term so far as the Indian background is concerned. The English word 'spirituality' is derived from 'spirit', or the non-material. In Sanskrit, we use the word *ādhyātmikatā*. *Ādhyātmikatā* is that which is concerned with the Soul or the Self—the Ātman which is the self-manifesting subject. In English, the word spirit is rather confusing. Spirit in the western sense means the intellectual or moral or non-physical part of man and not the Ātman. So, it is better that we use the word Ātman instead of the English counterpart, spirit. Ātman means the undying, unchangeable reality which interpenetrates our whole being. That which concerns the Atman is *adhyātma*. We generally use the word *adhyātma* to mean *dhārmikatā* or religiousness. That also could be confusing. However, we shall take it in this popular sense, without going into the grammatical significance of the word. When people believe in God and try to shape their lives in a way so that they can realize Him

or travel along the path of God-realization, it is called spirituality or *ādhyātmikatā*. A life dedicated to the worship of God through the observance of rituals and ethical rules is a *dhārmika* life. In a family, we see elders going to temples, offering worship at home, reciting hymns, telling beads, etc. All these are called *dharma* and a person who does these is a *dhārmika*. He is called an *ādhyātmika* person by common parlance.

### Discontent Amidst Plenty

Normally people are not very seriously concerned with true spiritual pursuit. It is unfortunate that we are so much pre-occupied with our body and its requirements. Very few people can go beyond the body and its requirements. But at the same time, we are aware that mere satisfaction of our physical needs is not enough. Suppose a man has got a long life along with high talents so that it is easy for him to get all the wealth and objects of enjoyment at his will; suppose too, that he has a very healthy body and powerful senses so that he is able to enjoy those objects. Still, there will always be a source of misery in him. If one has enough things to eat and no appetite, food will be useless. It will be not only useless, but will also create a sort of dissatisfaction. Wealth may be there, health may be there, and there may not be much of obstructions to enjoyments. Even then, sometimes we feel a sort of unhappiness without our realizing what the cause of this is. People sometimes say of themselves — 'ill at ease' or unhappy in the midst of all happiness. Life seems meaningless in the midst of plenty. We sometimes question ourselves: 'I have

everything that I may think worth having; but still, why is it that I feel unhappy?"

The reason for this unhappiness is this: There is in our essence, in the very core of our being, the Self or Ātman which remains unattained in spite of all these finite earthly comforts. That is what Swamiji has called 'blessed discontent'. It is a discontent, a dissatisfaction in the midst of perfect environment for worldly pleasures that we can think of. This discontent is there because, there is something lacking and that missing 'something' cannot be had through all the earthly sources of satisfaction. The attainment of that something, the Ātman or infinite Existence-Knowledge-Bliss, is the real goal of life. This is what is real spirituality.

In its various phases, therefore, spiritual seeking can be roughly divided into three aspects: its rational aspect, the rational or intellectual understanding of the ultimate reality; its emotional aspect, our attitude towards the reality or our feeling of kinship with God; and finally the volitional aspect, the desire to perform actions leading to God-realization and the attitude with which they are done. These three aspects of our personality are concerned with spiritual life. If we are to be spiritual, we must understand what that spiritual objective is, we must have devotion towards that highest spiritual reality and act for the attainment of our identity with that reality. This highest spiritual reality is the eternal existence of the Ātman in us, our innate divinity; the undying existence of absolute Knowledge, eternal Existence and Infinite Bliss in us behind the veils

of body-mind complex. For a devotee, the ultimate reality takes the form of the object of adoration upon whom he can shower all his love.

### The Nature of Freedom

We variously call that final objective of life as God or *Īśvara* or *Paramātman*, and other terms with similar meaning are used. But, we do not clearly understand the true significance of them. *Īśvara* means one who controls everything — this is the derivative meaning of the word. Sri Ramakrishna says that not even a leaf moves without His will.<sup>1</sup> He is there controlling everything; without His will nothing can happen. But we are conscious that we are free agents and we are doing things as we please. We may or may not do whatever we are thinking of doing or not doing. We are free agents so far as our feeling goes.

But, are we really so? Sri Ramakrishna says we are like puppets in the hands of someone who pulls the strings from behind the curtain. But then, we are feeling just the opposite of this. That is what is called *māyā* or ignorance. We think we are the doers, we are the enjoyers, we are the sufferers — all because of our lack of understanding of ourselves or of the ultimate controller of the world.

Even if we learn that God is controlling everything, we do not understand the true meaning of it. We only repeat the ideas learnt traditionally. When we say there

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<sup>1</sup> cf. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986) p. 159

is a God who controls everything, whether we understand this or not, we try to follow that idea to some extent according to our capacity. What do we actually do? We pray to God, we offer Him worship so that He would shape things as we like. Nobody wants God to be a controller. We want God to be a giver of whatever we ask of Him. He should be a giver of whatever we desire. If we are unwell, we pray to God to make us healthy. If we are in poverty, we pray to God to make us wealthy. We pray to God to give us long life and so on. That is how we conceive of God.

What is the use of such a God? When we pray for something and something else happens, we say, 'O God! What have you done?' That means, God has failed to act the way we want Him to! That is the kind of faith we have in God. Is it really God that we love? No. If we analyse a little, we find that we love only ourselves. Our belief in God is not for His sake, but for the sake of ourselves. We love God as a dispenser of our desired objects. It is love for ourselves that actuates us to love God. Let us consider some down-to-earth examples here. We generally love food. But, if we are unhealthy, the very sight of food is nauseating. That means that we do not love food but love it for our own sake. Suppose we love our relations. If our relations act in a way that is harmful to us, or to our children and other family members, our love for them vanishes. We love our children; but if they become disobedient or turn hostile, we stop loving them. That means, we do not love our children too. We only love ourselves. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, it is said: 'Nobody loves

anything for the sake of that itself; everything is loved for the sake of the Self.<sup>2</sup>

We do not know what is that 'Self'. The word 'Self' in the lower sense is called the ego or *aham*. But this way the Self is not understood in its true sense. There is a higher Self of which we have said earlier. We love others because they are connected with ourselves. Self is always the centre of our love.

### The Art of Loving God

The goal of devotion is to annihilate all self-love and cultivate love for God alone. It is a God-centred approach. True love of God first of all makes us feel that we must surrender ourselves to Him. We should feel that we must behave in a manner that would be pleasing to Him. If we behave in an adverse way, we should know that our spiritual life is not progressing in the right direction; our love for God is not growing. So, we have to shape our lives in accordance with this principle.

Love of God is the highest enjoyment that a man can think of. It is for the love of God that people shun their wealth and everything. People give up their connections with their relatives and friends and become completely absorbed in that love of God. We admire a God-man who has such great love for God.

<sup>2</sup> न वा अरे सर्वस्य कामाय सर्वं प्रियं भवत्यात्मनस्तु

कामाय सर्वं प्रियं भवति ।

आत्मा वा अरे द्रष्टव्यः श्रोतव्यो मन्तव्यो निदिध्यासितव्यः ॥

Love of God consists not necessarily of action. Love of God may make us sometimes worship Him in a detailed manner, or it may not. One may offer flowers and other offerings to God out of love, or one may not offer Him anything at all. Yet, one can be full of love for God. It is therefore very difficult to understand from ordinary standpoint a true lover of God. It is said in the *Bhāgavata*: ‘A devotee starts with ritualistic religion; he offers prayers to God; he offers flowers and other accessories of worship. These are all signs of *bhakti*. Through these is generated real love of God.’<sup>3</sup> Sri Ramakrishna says, and the *bhakti* scriptures also confirm that there are two kinds of *bhakti* or devotion; *vaidhī bhakti* and *rāgātmikā bhakti*. The former kind means the ritualistic religion and the latter the true and spontaneous devotion to God. Ritualistic religion leads the seeker to true love of God. The former culminates in the latter.

We have to feel that God is the source of everything good that we possess. We have also to eliminate our ego completely and perform our activities with a genuine love for God. According to various temperaments, the devotee assumes different attitudes in his emotional relationship with God. Some think themselves as servants of God, others think of Him as their child or friend or father or mother and so on. Another characteristic

<sup>3</sup> स्मरन्तः सारयन्तश्च मिथोऽघौघहरं हरिम् ।  
भक्त्या संजातया भक्त्या विभ्रत्युत्पुलकं तनुम् ॥

associated with this religion of love is that it should induce the devotee to sacrifice himself for the sake of others. That is another important characteristic, self-sacrifice. The third thing needed is that a true devotee is expected to be loving towards all and should be ready to serve them. These three then — love for God, love for all beings and self-sacrifice — are the conditions for a true devotee of God.

When a man suffers from hunger, he feels physically discontented and weak, and all his senses fail to function. When he gets food, with the taking of every morsel of food, his pain of hunger disappears, his discontent also goes and he feels stronger physically. In the same way, as a man progresses spiritually, the following three characteristics come to him simultaneously; namely, his devotion to God increases, his realization of the true nature of God becomes clearer and his attachment to the pleasures of the world becomes more and more reduced. Sri Ramakrishna says: 'The important thing is somehow to cultivate devotion to God and love for Him. ... When you have this love, you are sure to attain God. Afterwards, if it is necessary, God will explain everything to you and tell you about other paths as well.'<sup>4</sup> There is a verse in the *Bhāgavata*: 'Just as to one in the course of eating, every morsel of food gives satisfaction of mind, strength of the body, and freedom from hunger at the same time, so does a devotee, who has surrendered himself to the Lord, obtain simultaneously three things — intense

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<sup>4</sup> *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, op. cit., p. 506  
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devotion to the Lord, experience of Him, and detachment from all objects of the world.<sup>5</sup> Sri Ramakrishna says: 'Everything can be realized simply through love of God.'<sup>6</sup> Devotion is increased, ideal becomes clearer, love for sense objects becomes less and less. But we feel mistakenly that if we shed copious tears out of emotion, we are known as devotees of God. Only emotional outbursts signify nothing. We may feel that our devotion has increased. But, if our longing for the sense objects remains the same, what sort of devotion is that? Such emotional devotion without detachment from pleasures only brings in frustration. Our ideas about divinity may be clear from the study of scriptures but mere intellectual understanding is not true devotion.

Every devotee should therefore remember the above-mentioned three criterions for the true devotee which the *Bhāgavata* mentions. One should not cease to offer prayers to God until the attainment of these ideals. Let us hope that we all proceed in the right direction as indicated by the *Bhāgavata*.

<sup>5</sup> भक्तिः परेशानुभवो विरक्तिरन्यत्र चैष त्रिक एककालः ।  
प्रपद्यमानस्य यथाश्रतः स्युस्तुष्टिः पुष्टिः क्षुदपायोजनुघासम् ॥

*Bhāgavatam*, 11: 2: 42

<sup>6</sup> *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, *Digitized by Google*, *op.cit.* p. 376

## SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND SELF-SURRENDER

### The Redeemer of Mankind

A Western admirer speaks of Sri Ramakrishna as having been equal to Christ in suffering for the sake of human beings. It was for our sake that Sri Ramakrishna came, and accepted the sufferings of ours on himself. It is true that one has to suffer for one's wrong doings. In Sri Ramakrishna, there can be no such possibility, because he himself says that he has not done any wrong in his life. Yet, he had to suffer so much because he took upon himself the sins of all those who came to him after having done lots of misdeeds in the past. He did not have any personal gain out of this, but his only desire was to release the bound souls (*jivas*) from the bonds of suffering and misery. He wanted to save men. He disregarded even the highest happiness like *samādhi*, so that he could help people. He wanted to help the world until the end of his life. He knew his body was an instrument in the hands of the Divine Mother and that the Mother was working through his body for the good of the world. He never had any sense of ego or 'I'-ness. He would not address himself in the first person.

## Sri Ramakrishna on Prayer

Sri Ramakrishna came and showed us how to call upon the Lord. 'What sort of a prayer are you doing? Is anything achieved if one is not restless for the sake of God? You must weep for God in this way,' he used to say and so saying, would fall upon the ground and like a small child, roll over and over, weeping intensely.<sup>1</sup> He showed through his own life how one should be restless for God. It was this very earnest longing for God, *vyākulatā*, that brought him the first spiritual experience. When he would weep for the vision of the Divine Mother, people would gather around him and wonder if he was suffering from some severe stomach pain. Such was his pain for not having the blessed vision of the Mother. Why did he feel such intense longing? It was to show to mankind as to how one should weep for the sake of God. He wanted to emphasize that this kind of intense longing alone is the way to the Divine. In the beginning, he did not go through any established system of spiritual practice. Whatever the inner urge made him do, he did with all intensity. He did not have any preceptor or experienced guide to help him. It was only through the force of his intense longing that he had the first vision of the Divine Mother at Dakshineswar.

Sri Ramakrishna showed through his life that deep scriptural knowledge is not necessary to know God. Even as a child weeps disconsolately for its mother, the true *sādhaka*-child weeps for the sake of his Divine

<sup>1</sup> cf. Gambhirananda, Swami, *Śrī Ramakṛiṣṇa Bhaktamālikā* (Bengali) (Calcutta: Udbodhan Office, 1359 BS) Vol. 2, p. 36.

Mother. And the Mother cannot stay away from such a child.

We do not understand who this Divine Mother is. She who is the devotee in one form is the Mother in another. This was told by Sri Ramakrishna himself. The Lord comes in our midst, lives like ordinary mortals, and shows us how to seek God. But, it is not easy for us to believe that it is God Himself who is playing in our midst. Sri Ramakrishna says that it is difficult to have faith in God appearing in human form. Inside a human being measuring three cubits, the infinite Lord of the universe laughs, weeps, plays, suffers disease and finally accepts death. How could we imagine such a human being to be the Lord Himself!

It is said in the *Bhāgavata* that Śrī Kṛṣṇa showed His divine form to Vasudeva and Devaki in the prison house after He was born as their son. The parents saw the Lord bedecked with the *kaustubha* jewel, clothes and holding the conch, discus, mace, and lotus.<sup>2</sup> Knowing that their son was the Lord Himself, they saluted him and sang his praises. The Lord said that Vasudeva and Devakī had done great austerities in their previous lives. Pleased with their *tapas*, the Lord had shown them His universal form, and wanted them to ask for a boon. They then prayed to Him that a child be born to them, who would possess the same qualities

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<sup>2</sup> तमद्वृतं बालकमन्बुजेक्षणं चतुर्भुजं शङ्खगदार्युदायुधम् ।  
श्रीवत्सलक्ष्मं गलशोभिकौस्तुभं पीताम्बरं सान्द्रपयोदसौभगम् ॥

as the Lord Himself had. Not finding a parallel to Himself in qualities, the Lord Himself was born to them. Therefore was the Lord called *Pr̄ṣṇigarbha* or the son of *Pr̄ṣṇī* or *Devakī* in her previous birth. 'Never will my words fail and I have therefore come as your child,' said the Lord.<sup>3</sup>

### The Omnipotent Lord

Nārada was on his way back after having visited the Lord. A devotee asked him, 'What was the Lord doing?' Narada replied that the Lord was making elephants enter through the eye of a needle. The devotee thought that everything was possible for the Lord. He was similarly born as a child of *Devakī* to show that everything was indeed possible for Him.

In order to save the child from the cruel hands of Kamsa, Vasudeva crossed the overflowing Yamuna river carrying the baby to Gokula. *Devakī* had earlier said to her new-born child: 'O Lord! Give up your divine form. For, if Kamsa, who is anxiously waiting for your arrival comes to know of you, he will immediately kill you.' Owing to the Lord's illusory power, the mother had forgotten the divine powers of the child.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> जातो भूयस्तयेरेव सत्यं मे व्याहृतं सति

ibid., 10: 3: 43

<sup>4</sup> समुद्दिजे भवद्देतोः कंसादहमधीरधीः ।  
उपसंहर विश्वामत्रदो रूपमलौकिकम् ॥

ibid., 10: 3: 29-30

When the Lord works through *māyā* to bless the devotees, every impossibility in our eyes seems possible. What seems unimaginable to us is only a natural phenomenon for God. We imagine that the infinite Lord can be realized through our very finite *sādhanā*. What could be more absurd than this kind of thinking! The irony of the whole thing is that we imagine that we can bring the Lord down to us through our spiritual practices!

There is a beautiful anecdote in the *Bhāgavata*.<sup>5</sup> Mother Yaśodā tries to tie-up with a rope her naughty child Kṛṣṇa. But she repeatedly fails to bind Him with all the ropes available, until the Lord Himself, out of compassion, surrenders Himself to His mother. The meaning of this is that however great may be the amount of *sādhanā* that we have done, it is still too inadequate for God-realization. Even if our spiritual practices are stretched infinitely, it would be insufficient to bring down the Lord to our level of understanding. Then what is the use of *sādhanā*!

### Swami Turiyananda's Words

Swami Turiyananda says that it is to get rid of the ego of *sādhanā* that one has to do *sādhanā*. We think we shall do a lot of *japa* and *dhyāna*. If what we practise is not enough, we think that we shall increase our *japa* a lakh times, that we shall meditate for longer hours; but when we see that after having done all these we are not getting anywhere, our ego of spiritual

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<sup>5</sup> See ibid., 10: 9: 13-18

practices breaks down. When our ego is broken, it is time for the Divine to come down to us. The *sāstras* too say that it is impossible to reach Him if He does not allow Himself to be reached. Then, are all our *sādhanās* in vain? Swami Turiyananda says that a bird on a long flight tires out its wings and feeling that it can fly no more, sits down somewhere to rest. In the same way, having done our spiritual practices for long and getting tired and exhausted we feel that we can do no more and surrender ourselves over to the Lord's feet. Whenever in a blessed soul's life comes such a great moment of self-surrender, he becomes perfect and reaches fulfilment.

Turiyananda, then young Hari, would not come to visit Sri Ramakrishna for sometime. The ever-merciful Sri Ramakrishna enquired of a young disciple why Hari was not coming as often as before. The young man replied that the boy was engaged in the study of Vedānta and practice of austerities. He did not have the time to come to meet Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna remained silent. Some days later, when he visited Balaram Bose's house at Baghbazar, he sent word to Hari to come and see him. Hari lived nearby. He came; and as he was negotiating the steps leading to the first floor, he heard Sri Ramakrishna singing a song from a drama. The purport of the episode was this: The horse of Śrī Rāma's *asvamedha* sacrifice was held up by Lava and Kuśa, the sons of Rāma. They fought and defeated the army of Rāma. Hanumān, the foremost person in the army of Rāma, was tied up by the brothers, and brought to Sītā. 'Do you see, O Mother!

We have captured such a big monkey!' Hanumān sang in reply:

'O Kuśa and Lava!  
Be not thus proud.  
Could you catch me  
If I had not allowed?'

Sri Ramakrishna was singing this song repeatedly and tears were streaming from his eyes. His chest was wet, and the carpet at his feet too, was wet with his tears.<sup>6</sup> The young Vedāntin in Hari too could not contain himself. He understood that Sri Ramakrishna was singing that song specially to make him understand the truth of surrender.

The Lord was Himself there in the form of Sri Ramakrishna. Yet, Hari, instead of coming to him, thought that he would realize God or the Truth by the force of his *sādhanā*. In one stroke Sri Ramakrishna made it clear that it is not possible to see the Lord merely through intense austerity. If the Lord, of His own sweet will, bestows His grace on somebody, that soul alone can see Him. 'Whomsoever the Lord chooses, by him shall He be attained.'<sup>7</sup> The Lord knows on whom His grace should fall and when. Whoever has the capacity to be worthy of His grace

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<sup>6</sup> cf. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1991) Vol. 1, p. 423

<sup>7</sup> यमेवैष वृणुते तेन लायः ।

merely by his own efforts!

Though we are unable to attain the Lord merely by our spiritual practice, even then such practices are needed. That is why Hari Maharaj says that we do *sādhanā* only to eliminate our ego of *sādhanā*. We should not forget that amongst the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, none excelled Hari Maharaj in the intensity of spiritual practices, which he used to do for a very long period. That very Turiyananda (Hari Maharaj) says that Sri Ramakrishna taught him that none could reach the Lord if He does not reveal Himself to him. We see this idea repeated in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, page after page. If one gives up all vanity and surrenders at the feet of the Lord as the slave of His slaves—then alone may he receive His mercy. In many places in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Sri Ramakrishna has said, ‘Not I, not I. It is Thou! Thou!’<sup>8</sup> It is the ‘I’ alone that has bound us to this body. The ocean of nectar is in front of us, but we are dying of thirst. If the ego leaves the path to us, and that too can happen through the Lord’s grace alone, then only His grace is felt. Hence it is that the Lord repeatedly says, ‘Surrender. Surrender unto Me.’ This egotism or pride of ours will never leave us if we do not surrender to the Lord.

Sri Ramakrishna asks M., the compiler of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*: ‘Is there “ego” in me?’ M. does not know what to say. He says, ‘Sir, you have kept

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<sup>8</sup> *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda, (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986) pp. 389, 451, etc.

a little of ego for doing good to the world.' Sri Ramakrishna immediately corrects him, 'No, it is not I that have kept it. God Himself has kept it in me.'<sup>9</sup> In Sri Ramakrishna, there was nothing but the Mother.

### The Limits of the Ego

What do we mean by Sri Ramakrishna? Is it the body or the reality inside it? The body is but a casing. The infinite has hidden itself in this body so that ordinary men may not find it. We may become confounded if we see the infinite form of the Lord. Arjuna was shown the *viśvarūpa*, the cosmic form by the Lord. But, even the great hero, Arjuna, was terrified. He said that he could not stand the brilliance and requested Kṛṣṇa to withdraw the *viśvarūpa*. The great form was described in this manner: 'If the effulgence of a thousand suns were to appear in the skies simultaneously, it might compare somewhat with the splendour of this great form.'<sup>10</sup> He is incomparable. Hence, there is nothing in the universe which can be compared with Him. No ordinary mortal has the capacity to stand the vision of the supreme Lord's cosmic form.

How small is our limited self compared to that infinite! That very 'I' of us which feels that it has a body, that it is a saint or a sinner, a yogi or an ordinary person, is insignificantly small compared to the infinite. The infinite has become so small and plays in the

<sup>9</sup> ibid., p. 505

<sup>10</sup> *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 11:12

hearts of all beings. He, the Lord, has limited Himself in all beings by hiding His infinite nature. He has become the *Īśvara* as well as the *jīva*. We cannot reach Him through our mind. Sri Ramakrishna wonders if we could make a small cup contain the ocean. Is there anything more funny than when we try to contain the Lord with our limited mind and try to understand Him? The infinite remains infinite in spite of all our attempts to comprehend Him. We will know that we are finite; that is all. When we come to know of our helpless finitude, we pray for His mercy and say, 'Thy will be done', and that is what we call *śaranāgati* or complete surrender.

### The Meaning of Surrender

*Śaranāgati* is that state when we give up all confidence in ourselves and completely depend on Him and give ourselves up to Him. Not even a little of vanity should then remain within us. If we can renounce all our vanity and pride and humbly submit ourselves to Him, then our finite mind can feel His grace and become one with His infinity.

As the Upaniṣad says: 'If a drop of pure water falls into a reservoir of pure water, is that drop lost? No, it is not. It becomes one with the large expanse of water. Even so, the knower of the Ātman becomes one with the infinite.'<sup>11</sup> The limited and the unlimited selves

<sup>11</sup> यथोदकं शुद्धे शुद्धमासिकं तादृगेव भवति ।  
एवं मुनेर्विजानत आत्मा भवति गौतम ॥

*Katha Upaniṣad*, 2: 1: 15

are nothing but the same in essence. As Sri Rama-krishna says, pillows may be of different shapes, but the material inside is the same cotton.

Who is the person about whom we speak of as one suffering from disease and death, joys and sorrows? He too is the same Lord and none else. The *Gītā* says: 'There is no being, moving or unmoving, which can exist without Me.'<sup>12</sup> Again it is said in the *Bhāgavata*: 'O Lord! As you are without limitation, there is no inside or outside for you.'<sup>13</sup>

The devotees lovingly put it this way: The Lord is no doubt all-powerful; but can He exile His devotee outside His domain! No, He cannot do that. For, it is He that exists everywhere. If once we know that, our limitedness will not exist anymore. It will be all one. For the sake of His *līlā* (play), the Lord has divided Himself, as it were, to make things appear as many. Therefore the only way for us is to surrender to Him.

There is a beautiful story in the *Bhāgavata*:<sup>14</sup> Once Brahma stole away the calves while Śrī Kṛṣṇa and the cowboys were playing, in order to test His divinity. When the calves were not seen, Śrī Kṛṣṇa went in search of them. When he returned without finding them, he saw that the cowboys too were not to be seen. The Lord was worried. Playing as a human being, the Lord had become 'deluded', as it were. But he

<sup>12</sup> न तदस्ति विना यत्स्यान्मया भूतं चराचरम् ।

<sup>13</sup> *Bhāgavatam*, 10: 3: 17

<sup>14</sup> cf., *ibid.*, 10:13

*Bhagavad-Gītā*, 10:39

suddenly understood the whole game of Brahma and Himself became the calves and the cowboys. The game went on as before. After a moment of Brahma which amounts to one year in human calculation, Brahma came and saw that the play of the cowboys and the calves was going on as usual. He was surprised and thought: He had put to sleep the calves and the cowboys. How did they come here again? He wondered whether these were real or the ones that he had earlier stolen and put to sleep were real! Brahma then understood the whole thing. He saw that the Lord Himself had become both the cowboys and the calves. The story goes that Brahma was stunned at what all he saw. He got down from the swan, his vehicle, and fell at the feet of Kṛṣṇa in all humility.

The glory of the Lord is such that to explain it, the *Bhāgavata* shows the sad plight of none other than Brahma himself. What would our fate be when we go to measure Him! The only way left for us is to surrender ourselves to Him.



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